

BLOOD ON THE YUKON TRAIL

BY JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Gold and the Mounted"



CORPORAL DOWNEY of the Mounted
trails a sleigh across the broken ice-

CORPORAL DOWNEY

on the trail again.

Corporal Downey, that youngster of the Mounted who helps to bring law and order to desperate trails in the gold diggings of the Upper Yukon, solves a murder and saves a friend in this swift tale of the Northern ice. Brad Trevis, a young prospector starting across the broken ice of the Yukon to rescue two others caught in the break-up, is apparently swallowed up in the cataclysmic world of splintered boulders. His timorous brother-in-law who stays behind, murders an Indian, the only witness of his cowardice, and accuses Trevis of the crime. But Corporal Downey soon discovers enough to convince him that Trevis is not guilty. In a tremendous climax at a lonely trading post he brings a happy conclusion to a desperate adventure.

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BLOOD ON THE YUKON TRAIL

BOOKS BY
JAMES B. HENDRYX

BLOOD ON THE YUKON TRAIL
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BLOOD ON THE YUKON TRAIL

A Novel of Corporal Downey of the Mounted

BY
JAMES B. HENDRYX



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BOOK ONE

Chapter I

AN INDIAN BRINGS SOME NEWS

BRAD TREVIS stood in the doorway of the little tent and stared out into the downpour of cold rain that obscured the far bank of the mighty Yukon.

Behind him, in the tent, Duke Carnation lolled on his blankets, his shoulders propped against his duffel-bag, hands clasped behind his head. Once his eyes strayed stealthily from the broad back outlined against the gray smother of rain to the two rifles that leaned side by side against another duffel-bag within easy reach of his hand, and his hard smooth-shaven lips tightened ominously. One swift shot, he reflected, and Madge Trevis Carnation would become the sole heir to the Trevis fortune; and by virtue of reciprocal wills, he himself would become sole owner of the two claims on Dry Gulch which he and Brad Trevis had filed the summer before—two claims that already stood out preëminent in a district of rich claims. The rumble and

grind of moving ice, blended with the monotonous tattoo of rain on wet canvas, was punctuated at intervals by a mighty roar as a huge ice cake reared high against the barrier of a rapidly forming jam and toppled back to crash into fragments among other grinding cakes. Just one swift shot, persisted Duke Carnation's brain, and—the body of a man would be crushed into an unrecognizable mass, obliterated among those goring, tossing ice cakes.

His fingers unclasped, and a hand slipped stealthily toward the two rifles, when Brad Trevis turned from the doorway. "She's a big jam—and piling up fast. The water's begun to rise, and if she don't let go pretty quick we're going to have to hunt higher ground."

Carnation summoned a grin. "Damned dirty job moving camp in this."

"Yes," agreed Trevis, "but a whole lot better than getting mixed up in that—listen to that one! It's like the crash of a thousand brick walls. Where would a man be if that one had hit him? There wouldn't be enough left of him to grease a frying pan."

"I'm getting damned well fed up with this," grumbled the other. "This is the fourth day we've hung around here waiting for the ice to run

out. And now she's jammed, and God knows when she'll let go."

"It can't hold long with the water piling up behind it like it is," said Trevis. "She's liable to let go any minute. Anyway, there's nothing else we can do."

"When she does let go," Carnation continued, "the ice may run for a week so strong we can't put the canoe in the water. Or it may turn cold and we'd have to wait a week for the shore ice to hold us. What makes me sore is that we're only one good day's run from Dawson, and we've got to hole up here like a couple of damned Siwashers!"

"It's the luck of the game," grinned Trevis.

"Yes, but if you'd have listened to me and started a week ago we'd have got to Dawson ahead of the break-up."

"How the devil did I know the break-up was going to come two weeks too early this year?" replied Trevis, with a touch of irritation in his voice. He had once more stepped to the doorway and was regarding the rapidly rising water. "Six feet more, and we go uphill. The rain's letting up a little. I can see the other side, now." He paused abruptly and stared downriver where a solitary figure was making its way laboriously

over ridges of shore ice and through deep drifts of rain-sodden snow. "Speaking of Siwashes," he announced, "here comes one. And by the looks of him he sure has been somewhere."

Once again a stealthy hand paused midway to the rifles, and a frown of annoyance darkened the face of Duke Carnation. "If he thinks he's going to hang around and live off us, he's got another guess coming," he growled. "We haven't got any too much grub as it is—and we may be here for a week yet."

"We've got plenty," replied Trevis shortly, as he turned toward the little stove. "We don't either of us look as though a week of short rations would hurt us any. The Siwash eats when, and as, we do."

As smoke curled from the stovepipe a dejected and besodden figure appeared in the doorway. Cold rainwater trickled in tiny streams from the ends of his sleeves. The soggy coat, sagging open at the throat, revealed a saturated cotton shirt clinging tightly to the man's skin. Water oozed at every movement from cracks in his worn mukluks. He swayed slightly and reached a hand toward the tent pole for support.

"*Klahowya six!*" greeted Trevis, in the jargon. "*Kahta mika?*" (What ails you?)

"*Klahowyam!*" returned the man. "Spik Eengliss, me."

"Fine," said Trevis, turning from the stove to his duffel-bag. "Get those wet rags off and crawl into these. They'll fit you pretty liberally—but they're warm." Rising, he tossed the man a suit of heavy underwear, a flannel shirt, a pair of trousers, and a pair of heavy woolen socks. Gratitude flashed from the dark eyes, and as the Indian proceeded to divest himself of his sodden garments Trevis turned to the stove where already the savory odor of a moose meat stew was issuing from the pot.

"Friend of yours?" drawled Carnation, who still lolled on his blankets regarding the proceeding with a sneering grin.

"He is from now on," answered Trevis, without turning his head. He tossed the Indian a pair of rubber boots. "Come on, Siwash. Pull those on, and by the time you throw a bowl of this hot stew into you you'll feel better."

When Trevis ladled out a second bowl of stew Carnation frowned. "We go short so any damned Siwash that happens along can fill his belly on our good meat, eh? What's the big idea?"

"Good God, Duke! Can't you see the poor devil's weak from hunger? You don't begrudge

him the grub, do you? From now on it will be share and share alike."

"Like hell it will! If you're fool enough to split your grub with a Siwash when there's no more in sight, I'm not. You can do as you damned please; but I'll keep on eating as I've been eating."

Trevis grinned, but there was that in the eyes with which he regarded his brother-in-law that belied any hint of mirth. "You may think you will—but you won't," he said, in a low, even voice. "We're about of a size, Duke. But I'm a better man than you are. I showed you that once; and I can do it again. If you don't believe it, just shuck your coat and step outside."

Ignoring the challenge, the other relapsed into sullen silence, and Trevis turned to the Indian, who set the empty bowl on the ground and drew the back of his hand across greasy lips. "Where you come from?" he asked.

The Indian pointed through the doorway. "Com' 'cross de riv'——"

"Across the river!" interrupted Trevis. "You're crazy as hell! No man could cross that river!"

The Indian nodded solemnly. "Kin do. Me, I'm com' 'cross on de ice 'bout mile down. De ice all broke to hell. All pile oop." He indicated

with an up-and-down motion of his hand the jagged, high-flung cakes that formed the jam. "De ice she move. She mak de beeg noise. She shak'. 'Bout 'tousan' tam I'm t'ink she go'n' out, an' me, I'm git smash all to hell een de riv'."

"What in the devil did you cross for?" asked Trevis, his eyes fixed intently on the swart face.

"Me, I'm got to com'. Two Boston mans snowblin'. Good mans. Mebbe-so dey die, no git help. Me, I'm ain' kin git downriv' on odder side. De ice she pile agin de montaine. Mebbe-so I kin git down on dis side—so I'm com' 'cross. But no kin do on dis side, sam' lak de odder. So I'm no kin git Dawson. I'm turn roun' oopriv'. Mebbe-so mak' Sandy Ferguson—'bout twent' mile. But los' my pack in de ice. Git too wet—too col'—too 'ongry. Mebbe-so I'm ain' git to Sandy Ferguson."

"I'll say you wouldn't!" exclaimed Trevis. "There weren't but damned few miles left in you, old-timer. It's a good thing you ran onto us. Who are these white men? And where are they?"

"Nem' Cam'lo Beel an' Moosehide Sharley."

"Camillo Bill and Moosehide Charlie!" cried Trevis. "Hell, man, they're both old-timers! It's funny they'd go snowblind."

The Indian regarded Trevis with a smile of deep wisdom. "*Chechako* go snowblin'—git los'—freeze de feet—starve, 'cause she don' know nuttin'. She too mooch 'fraid de contry. *Skookum tilakum* go snowblin'—git los'—freeze de feet—starve, 'cause she know too mooch. She ain' 'nough 'fraid de contry. She t'ink she got de contry lick. She fergit som' leetle t'ing. Den she git hell, all sam' *chechako*."

"I guess you're right," agreed Trevis. "Familiarity breeds contempt, they say. And from what I've seen of the North, it's no land to trifle with. But where are these men?"

"'Bout two mile oop de beeg riv' comes een wan crick. Boston mans call Raven Crick—som'tam Beeg Crick. Siwash call Kahkah Chuck. 'Bout fi'-seex mile oop de crick Boston mans got tent."

"Why didn't you bring them down to the big river?"

"No kin do. Too mooch snowblin'. Too mooch no good snow for dog. De ice gon' out de crick. Boston mans got no canoe."

"How they fixed for grub?"

"Got plent' grub las' 'bout two week. Mus' got to git *doctin'*. Dem too mooch seek wit snowblin'."

"I can doctor snowblindness, all right. It's a trick I learned from a priest," said Trevis, who was already busy sorting his duffel and making up a light pack. "Come on, Duke," he called. "We've got to hustle to get across before that jam lets go!"

The other made no move, but lay back regarding Trevis with a half-sneering smile. "Personally," he said, "I haven't lost anything on the other side of the river."

"What!" cried Trevis, staring at the other aghast. "You mean you're not going? You mean you'd let two men—any two men—but especially men like Camillo Bill and Moosehide Charlie—suffer, die maybe, in a tent without turning over your hand to help them?"

"No man in his right mind would try to cross the river on that jam. It's apt to let go any minute, and if it did a man wouldn't last ten seconds. Not for me. I like to live. And besides, I'm not responsible for the welfare of any man—not even Camillo Bill and Moosehide Charlie. It's just as the Siwash said—if they hadn't got careless they wouldn't be in the fix they're in. They've made their bed. Let 'em lie in it. This one's good enough for me. To hell with 'em!"

For a long moment Brad Trevis stood glaring

down at the man through eyes narrowed to slits. When he spoke his voice cut like steel. "You're a yellow pup!" he said. "I'm telling it to you now. I told it to Madge before she married you."

The man's answer was a sneering laugh. "And what did she say?"

Ignoring the taunt, Trevis stepped through the doorway, turning for a moment to speak to the Indian. "How long did it take you to cross the river?"

"T'ree-four—mebbe-so fi' hour. I fa' down—git oop—res'—fa' down—git oop som' mor'—I los' de time. I ain' know." He followed Trevis from the tent. "I'm com' 'long," he announced.

"No, you don't! You couldn't make it. You're too weak. You'd be a drag on me—and I want to make time. What's your name?"

"Nem Moses Fox."

"You're a man, Moses," said Trevis, offering his hand. Then, purposely raising his voice: "Go back in the tent and tell that yellow dog I said that if he don't treat you right, the next time I see him he'll wish to God he had. So long."

Chapter II

THE JAM LETS GO

DULL red mounted to the face of Duke Carnation as he lay back on his blankets and listened to the words of biting scorn that reached him from the outside. The Indian reëntered the tent and without a word squatted close beside the little stove. Carnation stared at him sullenly, his mind on Brad Trevis. . . . "Yellow dog, eh? Damn him! I'll show him who's a yellow dog. I ought to have knocked him off long ago. I've had plenty of chances—but—the police are no fools. A man's got to be careful. He's always had it in for me. Did his damndest to keep Madge from marrying me; and when she wouldn't listen to him, he made the best of it and accepted me as a brother-in-law. Guess I'm yellow, at that. If I'd had any guts both the claims would be mine right now. And then, to hell with Brad Trevis, and Madge, and the old man, too! There's enough in those claims for me, without waiting around for the old man to kick the bucket.

Stoel offered us a hundred thousand apiece for 'em last fall—and they're worth twice that. There's only one woman in the world for me—Adèle Santois! My God, her dancing sets a man afire! She'd leave Frenchy LaBelle for me in a minute—if I could show her the dust!" . . .

The Indian rose, picked up the ax, and disappeared through the doorway. A moment later Carnation heard the sound of chopping on a dead spruce. The rain beat dismally upon the canvas, and the wind was rapidly rising. The Indian returned with an armful of firewood and proceeded to stoke the stove. "De riv' she com' oop," he announced. "Pret' queek, dat bes' we git mor' oop de hill."

Carnation answered nothing, his thoughts on Adèle Santois, the dancing girl, who was the Yukon's latest darling. . . . "If it hadn't been for this damned ice jam I'd have been in Dawson three days ago. And now Brad will tell it around that I was afraid to cross the river to help out those two men—or, if he don't, the Siwash will—and in Dawson they'll believe it. Good God! Even Adèle might believe——" The thought was cut short by a sound—a sound that brought the Indian to his feet and out through the door of the tent with Carnation close at his heels. It

was not the sound of the up-ending, crashing ice cakes but a mighty, all-pervading sound—the sound of a thousand cannon, far off, booming in unison. Both stared spellbound at the sight of the vast sea of high-flung ice pinnacles in motion. The jam had let go!

Other sounds filled the air; the rasping grind of mighty ice masses, the explosion of riven crags, the crashing of shattered cakes, and the thin tinkle of tiny fragments as the vast ice field moved majestically forward, its surface changing with kaleidoscopic rapidity amid the ever-increasing roar that seemed the very symphony of abysmal chaos.

The Indian was the first to speak; “By Goss, dat mans! She good mans—but she smash all to hell now!”

“What’s that?” cried Carnation, seizing him roughly by the shoulder and spinning him around. “You mean—he hasn’t had time to get across!”

The Indian shook his head. “She ain’ kin git mebbe-so halfway.”

“Are you sure?”

Noting the evident eagerness of the man’s words, the Indian nodded, and removing his battered cap, crossed himself devoutly. “She damn good mans. She dead now.” Presently he

pointed to the rapidly receding water which had risen to within two or three feet of the camp level. "De water git too mooch beeg. De win' she too mooch push. De ice she go'n' to hell."

"How long before the river will be safe for a canoe?" asked Carnation.

The Indian scanned the upper reach of the ice-choked river. "Wan day—mebbe-so two day," he opined. "You got canoe?"

"Sure." The man pointed toward a pile of bark and brush in a near-by thicket. "My partner and I cached it there last fall. We've got a couple of claims back in the hills, and it's here we left the river. We're heading for Dawson, and we figured that if the river was open we'd use the canoe, and if it wasn't we'd go down on the ice—and we got here to find neither ice nor water that we could use."

The Indian nodded. "Mebbe-so got to patch."

"Patch what?"

"De canoe. All tam got to patch canoe een de spreeng. Git dry out. Git de crack."

"Hell!" cried Carnation, irritably. "I haven't got anything to patch it with. Probably couldn't do a decent job if I did."

The Indian smiled and pointed to the spruce forest. "Plent' gum. Me fix um."

"Get busy, then, and earn your grub. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing you came along, after all."

While the Indian busied himself with the canoe, Carnation chopped more firewood and retired into the tent, where for hours he lay on his blankets, thinking. When the shadows lengthened in the valley the Indian stepped into the tent and eagerly devoured the bowl of stew Carnation begrudgingly offered him. When he had finished, the white man indicated Trevis's bed with a nod. "You can crawl into his blankets," he said. "He won't be needing them. What makes you so damned sure he didn't get to the other side?"

The Indian regarded him stolidly. "Me, I'm com' 'cross. T'ree, four hour—mebbe-so mor'."

"Well, if it took you that long—a man used to ice travel—there isn't a chance in the world that he made it. He hadn't been gone more than an hour and a half, or two hours, at the most."

"She no mak'. She dead. I'm t'ink dat bes' t'ing we tak' canoe to-mor'—mebbe-so too mooch ice—nex' day, an' go 'cross de riv' an' breeng out de two mans w'at snowblin'."

"The hell you do!" exclaimed Carnation, sarcastically. "Didn't I tell you I was on my way to Dawson?"

"We ain' kin leave two good mans snowblin'," persisted the Indian. "Mebbe-so dem die."

"That's their lookout—not mine. I've got business in Dawson."

"Kin go Dawson w'en we git de mans. Dawson no go'n' ron 'way."

An angry retort leaped to Carnation's lips. With an effort he restrained it, and for the space of seconds sat regarding the Indian in silence, while his brain worked rapidly. Beyond a doubt Brad Trevis was dead, and only this Indian knew that he, Duke Carnation, had refused to cross the Yukon on a precarious ice jam, but he would pass the word in Dawson that after the jam had broken he had refused to make the comparatively easy journey across the river in a canoe. And well he knew what the verdict of Dawson would be. In fancy he could see the withering scorn flashing in the dark eyes of Adèle Santois. Adèle Santois! If it were not for Adèle he would cross the river and take the two snowblind men into Dawson—but, with Brad Trevis out of the way, the claims were his, and from the moment he hit Dawson, Adèle would be his! The days of delay in finding the men and bringing them in would be intolerable days with Adèle in the cabin of Frenchy LaBelle.

When he spoke it was to address the Indian with a grin: "I guess you're right, Siwash. We couldn't leave those poor devils up there to starve. To-morrow we'll cross the river and hunt 'em up."

The drizzling rain, interspersed with violent showers, continued throughout the night and most of the following day, which was spent in patching the canoe that, owing to careless covering, was badly cracked in places. Toward evening the wind shifted and it turned cold. The run of floating ice thinned until broad expanses of the river showed free of cakes.

In the morning, while the Indian busied himself with the firewood, Carnation stepped to the river for water. For some moments he stood staring down at the footprints in the frozen slush that surfaced a huge ice cake anchored to the shore by the new ice of the night's freezing—footprints left by Brad Trevis when he had gone to the river for water. Dipping his pail, the man returned to the tent, a frown of deep concentration upon his not unhandsome face.

Breakfast over, he helped the Indian to carry the canoe to the outer edge of the big cake where no new ice had formed. Returning, they rolled their beds, and while he busied himself with the

stovepipe, the Indian picked up a bed-roll and stepped to the river. When the man was squarely in the center of the ice cake, Carnation fired.

Without a sound, the Indian stumbled a few steps and pitched forward on his face, raised himself on his hands and knees, and settled sidewise on the ice, his arms and legs twitching feebly. Then he lay very still.

For long moments Duke Carnation stood tense, as though paralyzed by a mortal terror, staring wide-eyed at the thing that lay huddled grotesquely upon the ice. It seemed to his overwrought nerves that the roar of that rifle shot must have carried to Dawson. In sudden panic his eyes darted upshore, downshore, and out over the broad expanse of river where floating ice cakes flashed white in the first slanting rays of the rising sun.

With an effort he got hold of himself and turned feverishly to the task of breaking camp. "I'm all right, now. I'm all right, now," he kept repeating aloud, as his trembling hands fumbled at their work. "If I stick to my story it'll be better if they do find his body on the ice cake. But it must be *below* the jam! Then if Brad should happen to escape with his life it will be just too damned bad for him."

An hour later Carnation slipped the canoe into the water and loaded it. With the ax he chopped the inch of new ice that bound the cake to the shore, and by dint of mighty effort with a pole succeeded in working the cake out into the current. When it floated free, he laid Trevis's rifle—the rifle that had killed the Indian—on the ice near the body and, casting loose from the cake, bent his back to the paddle.

Chapter III

CORPORAL DOWNEY INVESTIGATES

CORPORAL DOWNEY, youngest non-com of the division, was on desk at headquarters in Dawson when a man stepped across the floor and paused before him. He was a large man, and the young officer noted that he was evidently ill at ease. He introduced himself abruptly: "Carnation's my name. Duke Carnation. I'm a partner of Brad Trevis. I'm his brother-in-law."

He paused and Corporal Downey nodded, his eyes focused with disconcerting directness upon the other's face. "I know Brad Trevis," he said. "An' it seems to me I've heard of you. Is there something we can do for you?"

"Well—maybe—and maybe not. I just wanted to report that Brad Trevis has disappeared."

"Yeah?" Downey made a note on a pad of paper. "Know anything about the circumstances?"

"Sure I do—up to a certain point. Brad and I have been working our claims on a creek back from the river——"

"What crick?"

"It isn't named. We figured on calling it Trevis Creek. It's a day's travel straight back from the mouth of a little creek that runs into the river about forty miles above here, on the east bank. We got low on supplies and started for Dawson. When we hit the Yukon a few days ago, we found that the break-up had come and the river was running so full of ice, we didn't dare to launch the canoe. We camped and a big jam formed below us. We were low on meat, so after we'd waited a couple of days we decided to do a little hunting.

"While we were back in the hills someone came along and stole an outfit of Brad's clothing—rubber boots, underwear, shirt, pants, and socks. He evidently hadn't been gone long when we got back to the tent. Brad was furious. Grabbing up his rifle, he took out after the fellow, whose tracks headed downriver along the edge of the jam. That's the last I saw of him. I waited in the tent, expecting him to return any minute. Suddenly there was a hell of a roar, and I ran out to find that the jam had let go and the ice was moving. I tried to follow Brad's trail, but the rain had washed it out, except in places here and there where he'd stepped in deep slush. I gave it up and went back to the tent. Next day I hunted

some more, but could find no trace of him, so early this morning I broke camp, and as the river was nearly free of ice, I came here. I'm afraid poor Brad followed the thief out onto the jam, and it let go before he could possibly have reached the opposite shore. He certainly didn't turn back, or he would have come to camp."

"Most likely," agreed Downey. "That was a big jam all right. We watched her go by here. If anyone was caught out on it he wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance. There wouldn't even be no remains to speak of, with them big cakes millin' an' grindin' around. There don't seem to be much we can do. If I hear anything I'll let you know. Where do you stay when you're in town?"

"I live with my wife in a cabin down near the sawmill. Not a very prepossessing home, but the only thing we have been able to get."

Downey smiled. "Houses is scarce, an' they're goin' to be a heap scarcer. A man better hang onto what he's got. Any roof with four walls in under it would look prepossessin' as hell to lots of folks, right now."

"I guess that's right. You can get in touch with me there if anything turns up. By the way, Colonel——"

"Corporal," corrected Downey.

"Well, Corporal, then—Brad and I have a written agreement to the effect that in the event of the death of either, both claims revert to the other. Where will I make application for the proper transfer?"

"Well," considered Downey, "his property would have to go through the hands of the public administrator, an' there ain't none be'n appointed for this district yet. The police are handlin' about everythin'—from carryin' the mail to the care of sick babies. You can file yer agreement with the inspector to-morrow. But I wouldn't hardly look fer no quick action on it. We're awful busy, an' besides you ain't got no proof of death."

"Proof of death!" cried Carnation. "Didn't you yourself just say that with those ice cakes milling and grinding around the way they did, there wouldn't be anything left of a man?"

"That's jest what I was thinkin'. There wouldn't be no, what you might say, corpus delicti."

The other started. "Corpus delicti!" he exclaimed sharply. "That's a term used in cases of murder, isn't it?"

"Yump!" agreed Downey. "Maybe there's another word for it where it ain't murder—but

it amounts to the same thing. Jest believin' that a man was out on that jam when she let go ain't provin' he's dead, by quite a bit. Better talk to the inspector in the mornin'. He knows more about them things than I do."

When the man had gone, Corporal Downey sat scowling at his desk. "Somethin' stinks," he muttered. "If that citizen didn't actually kill Brad Trevis, he knows a whole heap more than he told. His story runs a little bit too glib. Guess I'll ask the old man to let me nose around a bit, upriver."

Two days later Corporal Downey squatted on a huge ice cake that was revolving slowly in a shore eddy and pondered deeply as his gaze strayed from the footprints in the frozen slush to the frozen body of an Indian and the rifle that lay near by. Meticulously, he calipered the rubber boots worn by the dead man and compared their measurement with the frozen footprints. "The man that made them tracks wore mukluks. They might be Trevis's tracks, an' them might be Trevis's boots on the Injun—an' his clothes, too. It's a cinch they ain't his own. They're big enough fer two of him. Carnation's a big man, too. They might be his clothes—an' his tracks in the slush. But, I'm bettin' they're Trevis's—

jest like Carnation said. He's pretty smart—leavin' the Injun dressed in Trevis's clothes where he'd be apt to be found. I'll bet that'll turn out to be Trevis's rifle, too. Yump—pretty damn smart. There's a few things he overlooked, though. Them tracks was made before the cold snap come on—an' the Injun wasn't killed till after. He never even dented the surface when he fell, an' he ain't froze in. He's layin' plumb on top of the frozen slush. It was cold—freezin'—when he was shot—'cause that blood from the back of his head froze pretty fast, an' the blood on the ice never mixed with any water—an' the foot tracks is full of frozen rainwater. The rifle was laid on hard ice, too. It's bedded in a little, where the sun hit the lock an' the barrel—but the stock ain't bedded in. Then, about this chunk of ice—it wasn't here when the jam went out—an' it wasn't part of the jam—or it wouldn't be here now. Therefore, it must have be'n above the jam. Carnation said they was camped above the jam, an' that Trevis followed the thief downriver along the edge of the jam. If Trevis had killed this Injun, Carnation would have stumbled onto him when he was huntin' fer Trevis. An', believe me, if he had he would have reported it! He wouldn't overlook no bet like

that—to let the law clear the title to them claims fer him. That's a couple of things he overlooked. Then there's the fact that Brad Trevis wouldn't never shoot no one—white, black, red, or yaller—from behind. Carnation prob'ly knocked Trevis off, an' then shot the Injun, or visy-versy, an' drug Trevis out on the jam, an' left the Injun where someone would find him to make his story jibe. I know damn well that Brad Trevis never shot the Injun—an' I know damn well that Duke Carnation did. But I can't prove it—and if he sticks to his story, the chances is, I never can. Guess I'll jest shove on up to where they camped an' have a look-see."

Removing the body and the rifle to the shore, Downey pushed on upstream and a few hours later he stood at the deserted camp site. The sudden cold snap had checked all small runs and rivulets and reduced the volume of water that poured into the mighty Yukon from all her confluents, with the result that the big river itself was several inches lower than it had been even after the jam had let go.

Young Downey smiled grimly as he glanced at the rim of new ice well above the water line that recorded plainly the ax marks that had severed the huge chunk from the shore. An

hour's search revealed nothing of importance save the Indian's discarded garments that lay in a frozen heap, and the little fire and old tin can the Indian had used in preparing the gum for the canoe. "So the Injun camped with 'em here long enough to patch up their canoe fer 'em! Funny, now, ain't it, that Carnation 'plumb fergot to mention the Injun? Trevis prob'ly give him the clothes fer the canoe job. By the looks of the ones he throw'd away he was wet clean through before he changed. It's plain enough to me what come off here, but if Carnation sticks to his story I can't prove a damn thing. He's smart, all right—so damn smart that if Brad Trevis was to show up right now I'd have to arrest him fer murder. Of course, when it come to the trial, if he was here to testify, it wouldn't take no sensible jury long to figure who was tellin' the truth. But Brad Trevis ain't here—an' by the looks of things he won't be!"

Chapter IV

SNOWBLIND

LEAVING camp, Brad Trevis hurried downriver and struck out onto the jam at the point where the Indian had left it. For a quarter of an hour he followed the back trail, climbing over up-ended cakes, crawling on hands and knees beneath precariously suspended fragments when the slightest movement of the jam would have buried him beneath a hundred tons of ice, edging in between cakes, climbing around others, slipping into deep crevices to squirm his way out along the edges of giant fragments, chipping toe steps in slanting surfaces—while all about him the ice groaned and thundered as displaced masses crashed into new positions.

Then, from a high pinnacle, he saw a smoother trail toward the upper edge of the jam. Where the Indian had blundered straight ahead, surmounting the obstacles as they came, Trevis used his brains. He swerved from the Indian's trail, and after ten minutes of herculean effort,

found himself on a narrow strip of comparatively easy going, where what had evidently been an enormous floating pan had struck the jam en masse, and instead of rearing high and doubling backward as the smaller cakes had done, had slid up and broken away, leaving a considerable portion of its edge for the most part intact and nearly level.

Closer, now, to the upriver edge of the jam, the thunderous noise of the up-ending cakes was almost deafening. Beneath his feet he could feel the ice shudder and heave at the impact. Gathering himself, he sped toward the distant shore whose wooded heights were dimly visible through the fine drizzling rain. All too soon the smooth track ended, and again he was forced to scramble as best he could over, under, and around the titanic confusion of up-ended cakes.

At the end of an hour he rested for five minutes on top of a huge fragment poised near the edge of the jam. Personal peril was forgotten as the man sat staring in awesome fascination at the massive cakes that heaved and shivered and exploded into a thousand fragments almost at his feet. He figured that three quarters of the distance across the river was behind him.

Slipping from his perch he clambered on. The

shore for which he was aiming seemed close now, while the shore he had left was lost in the mist. Suddenly he was thrown from his feet as though by the tremor of a mighty earthquake. All about him ice masses were shifting, tumbling, crashing and grinding together, with the bellow of a thousand thunders. Scrambling to his feet he leaped aside as a hundred-ton fragment ground over the spot where he had been lying. With the suddenness of a blow the realization struck him that the whole jam was in motion. In sheer desperation he managed to scale the huge fragment, leap to another and yet another of the slowly shifting masses. Instinctively he sensed that his only hope lay in reaching the extreme upper edge of the jam, where even now the force of impact of the newly arriving cakes was diminishing as the vast mountain of jumbled ice gathered headway. All about him cakes and fragments ground together, shifted, slithered into new positions. Leaping, falling, scrambling to his feet, dodging death by inches, Trevis worked his way against the moving mass. Only a few hundred yards away the wooded heights were slipping past.

Before him the ice cakes had ceased to rear and crash against the edge of the moving jam.

The whole surface of the river seemed solid with ice—but it was a level field of cakes and pans crowded close together, and not the wild chaos of shifting crags from which he was just emerging. Only a few minutes more, and if he could gain that level field he would be comparatively safe. Suddenly the huge fragment upon which he was poised shuddered—rolled. Frantically Trevis struggled to keep his balance on that shifting, slanting surface of ice. His feet shot from under him. He thrashed out wildly for a hand hold, and the next instant an icy chill seemed to drive the very breath from his body as the yellow waters closed above his head.

A powerful swimmer, he instinctively struck out, and as he rose to the surface his head encountered smooth ice. Realization struck him like a flash—he was under the floe! This was the end. A few minutes more and he'd have made it. Duke Carnation would have both claims, now. Damn Duke Carnation! The yellow dog! What would happen to Madge? How long before she would find out about Adèle Santois? At thought of his sister a mighty rage surged within him. His lungs seemed bursting. With what seemed his last atom of strength, he opened his eyes and dived, turned and glanced upward. There—to the

right—a triangle of light against the inky blackness! He struck out—one stroke—two—a dozen—and his head emerged between the wedged cakes as the spent breath whistled from his tortured lungs, and he was sucking in the clean air in great gulping gasps. Elbows on the surface of the ice, he became conscious of a numbness that seemed encompassing his limbs. The ice cakes shifted a bit, and he shuddered as he noted that the opening between the cakes had become smaller.

With a mighty effort he worked his numbing legs, and after what seemed an hour of struggle, while the two cakes shifted closer and closer together, he succeeded in drawing himself clear of the water, and rolling a few feet back from the hole. He closed his eyes as a delicious stupor enveloped him. He felt fine, now. He had beat the damned river—and he was safe! He became conscious of a deadly chill. With an effort he opened his eyes and glanced about him. The hole through which he had emerged a few minutes before—or was it hours?—had disappeared. Only a few yards away the wooded shore was slipping past. He must go ashore. Somewhere Camillo Bill and Moosehide Charlie were lying snowblind in a tent. He could cure snowblind-

ness. He remembered how the priest had done it. But—time enough for that. He would rest a bit. He was comfortable here—except for the damned cold. Wouldn't the rain ever stop falling? It annoyed him—that continual drizzle against his face. He essayed to sit up and settled back. The sitting up seemed not worth the effort. But he was cold.

Gradually his torpid brain roused to a realization of his position. Might better have died quickly there under the ice than to crawl out and die slowly of exposure. He moved his arms and legs stiffly but persistently. After a few moments he rose to his hands and knees, then to his numbed feet. He thrashed his arms with increasing vigor as the sluggish blood began to circulate through his body. He took a few faltering steps, stamping the ice as hard as he could. A thousand needles seemed piercing his skin. His knees gave under him and he fell to the ice. Again he rose to his feet, and by sheer effort of will forced himself to walk up and down. The steps became firmer and he increased the walk to a clumsy trot. Five minutes more, and he had regained normalcy. He struck out for shore at a strong run, leaping from cake to cake, the red blood surging through his veins in a strange ecstasy of exhilar-

ation. He had beat the damned river at her own game! He was a man!

Standing on the moving floe, he watched his chance, and with a running jump cleared twelve feet of open water to land on a rocky point. Ten minutes later, between a reflector of spruce boughs and a rousing fire, he stood naked, wringing out his sodden clothing, while his skin glowed and tingled in the grateful warmth.

That night he camped in comparatively dry clothing beside his fire, and daylight found him plodding upriver through the fine driving rain. He wondered how far downriver he had been carried on the moving ice. The Indian said that the two men were about five or six miles up a creek that flowed into the Yukon some two miles above the jam.

At the end of two hours he came to the mouth of a considerable creek. After much prowling about he ran across tracks in the sodden snow, up the creek, a few rods back from the river—the tracks, doubtless, of the Indian. Trevis heaved a sigh of relief. He could not have been carried more than three or four miles on the ice. He had no clear recollection of the passing of time—he had feared it might have been ten or twenty miles.

Two hours later he rounded a bend of the creek to see smoke issuing from the stovepipe of a small tent. As he neared the tent several husky dogs rose from the snow and circled about stiff-legged, the hair along their spines rising threateningly. From the back-curved lips of their leader came a menacing, throaty growl. Trevis halted. "Hi, in there!" he shouted. "Call off your dogs!"

A head and shoulders were thrust through the door of the tent, and a flow of words luridly descriptive of ancestry sent the dogs slinking to the rear. "Come on in," invited the voice. "We're snowblind. Who are you?"

"Hello, Camillo! It's Brad Trevis."

"Brad Trevis, eh!" cried the other, heartily. "By God, I always claimed you was the pick of the chechakos! The Siwash got through, then! But—how in hell did you git here ahead of all the sourdoughs—Old Bettles, an' Swiftwater Bill, an' Burr McShane? They'd of come hell-bent when they know'd we needed 'em. We didn't figger anyone would be along yet a while. You sure must of burned the snow, son! We figgered, by the noise, they was a big jam. Sounded like Grant takin' Bunker Hill."

"There was a jam," laughed Trevis, "I crossed on it. I'd have been here last evening if the

damned thing hadn't let go before I got across."

"God A'mighty! Was you on her when she let go?"

Again Trevis laughed. "On it; and under it. I played both sides against the middle."

A hand stretched gropingly toward him. "Put 'er there, pard. By God, yer a meat chewer! That crossin'll make history on the Yukon. Come on inside an' cook us up a good meal of vittles. Them dough-gods Moosehide mixed up tastes like hell!"

"They ain't no worse than the moose meat you b'iled up las' night—hair an' all," defended Moosehide Charlie.

Trevis laughed as he glanced into the pan. "The dough-gods would have been better, maybe, if you'd taken the dog moccasins out of the pail before you mixed 'em."

"It's hell not to be able to see," grinned Moosehide. "But, at that, I bet, with them moccasins in, them dough-gods would stay by a man longer. They's some substance to dough-gods like them."

"I'll put on the stew," said Trevis, "and while it's cooking I'm going to doctor your eyes. It'll take several days of treatment to get them back where you can see much."

"Did you fetch some medicine with you?" cried Camillo Bill, hopefully.

"No. But, I can make some. There was no place to get medicine. The Siwash never got to Dawson——"

"Never got to Dawson!" exclaimed Moosehide Charlie. "Where in hell did he git?"

"He got to the river and couldn't get around the jam, so he crossed to the other side. Duke Carnation and I were camped there, just above the jam, and he told us about you fellows. He was about all in—hungry and wet to the skin. I gave him a good feed and an outfit of clothing, and then came on here."

"An' that goddam fourflushin' brother-in-law of yourn, I s'pose he stayed in camp!" exclaimed Moosehide.

"Well—yes—Duke didn't come," admitted Trevis.

"You're damn whoopin' he didn't come!" cried Camillo Bill. "Look here, Brad Trevis—it's time someone spoke out in meetin' an' told you a thing er two. 'Course, as a man might say, God makes brother-in-laws—but he don't make pardners, by a damn sight! Yer too good a man to be pardners with the likes of him. I wouldn't trust him two spits an' a jump out of my sight."

You mark my words—he'll git you, one way er another—give him time. 'Course it ain't none of my business, but if he was married to my sister, an' playin' fast an' loose with a high-kickin' strumpet like 'Dèle Santois, damned if I wouldn't jest nachelly take him apart an' lose the pieces!"

"We're not partners exactly, though I understand that Duke has given it out that we are. We camp together and work our adjoining claims, that's all. I warned my sister against marrying him," Trevis added, somberly. "But he must have some good points. She loves him. She don't know about Adèle Santois."

"If he ever had any good points, they broke off when he was damned young," snorted Camillo Bill. "The ones that sticks out on him now ain't good—not what you'd notice."

"How you goin' to fix up our eyes if you didn't fetch no medicine?" queried Moosehide. "Mine burns like they was full of hot ashes, an' sometimes our heads feels like they'd jest nachelly blow up with the pain in 'em."

"Got any lead?" asked Trevis. "Bullets, or anything?"

"Sure," answered Camillo Bill. "That old black powder .38 cannon of Moosehide's shoots

soft bullets. What you aimin' to do—shoot the snowblind out of our eyes?"

"I'll shoot it out of your eyes, all right," grinned Trevis. "Where are the bullets?"

Moosehide indicated his pack, and after some rummaging Trevis found the cartridges and pried a bullet from a shell. Beating it flat between two stones, he tore a tiny fragment from his cotton handkerchief and, twisting it into a cone placed it on the little lead disk and set fire to it. When it had completely burned he blew the ash away and with a small moistened swab made by wrapping a scrap of cotton lint about a match, he collected the yellowish residue and applied it to the eyes of the two stricken men, holding the lids apart with thumb and finger. So slight was the residue that the process required innumerable burnings, but by the end of an hour the eyes had been treated and bandaged against the light.

"There," said Trevis. "Two or three treatments a day for three or four days will put you in shape. I'll smudge up some birch bark and make some eyeshades. But if this rain keeps up there won't be much snow left by the time you're ready to travel."

"She won't keep up," opined Camillo Bill.

"There's a change comin'! It's gettin' colder already. I can feel her."

Camillo Bill's prophecy proved correct. By the middle of the afternoon the wind had shifted into the north, and by evening the sodden snow was frozen to a flinty hardness.

"It would be good sleddin' now," said Moosehide Charlie. "But I'll bet it would be hell along the river, what with ice cakes an' all. I wisht we had a canoe."

"I don't believe we could make it along the river with a sled," Trevis replied. "The ice is piled clear against the cliffs in places. I had all I wanted of it in about six or seven miles, without a sled. My idea would be to move camp in the morning down to the river. The trail's pretty good along the creek, and you fellows could take turns riding the sled and hanging on to the tail rope. Then maybe we could flag someone going by with a canoe or a poling boat."

"That's the stuff," agreed Camillo Bill. "That's usin' yer head. Yer a sure enough sourdough, Brad. Yer good enough fer me to trail with, day er night. An' I never did see a sourdough that know'd enough to cure snowblind by burnin' a rag on a bullet. My eyes feels better already."

"Mine, too," agreed Moosehide Charlie. "But

it sure stung like hell when he was puttin' it on."

"I'm not guaranteeing a cure," laughed Trevis. "All I know is that I saw a priest last spring fix up a bunch of Koyukuk stampeders in a roadhouse—and it worked. How'd you come to get snowblind?"

Camillo grinned sheepishly. "Jest nachelly had it comin'. Fergot to pack along any snow glasses, an' kep' puttin' off makin' eyeshades till it was too late. They's no fool like an old fool, they say—an' I guess they're right."

Camp was moved the following morning to a clump of scrub timber on a point that commanded a considerable view both up and down the river. Trevis rigged a signal pole and divided his time between cooking the meals, treating the snowblind eyes, and watching for the appearance of some craft on the river. Thus a week passed without so much as a canoe heaving into sight. The eyes showed steady improvement, however. The bandages were removed on the fourth day, and on the fifth day the three indulged in a game of stud, which Trevis peremptorily halted at the end of an hour. "That's enough," he announced, gathering the cards. "You birds can't afford to strain your eyes."

Camillo Bill grinned broadly and winked painfully across at Moosehide Charlie. "He knows a hell of a lot of tricks fer a chechako, don't he, Moosehide? He won't let us strain our eyes; but he ain't bothered a damn bit about the strain he put on our pockets."

"Ain't it the truth!" agreed Moosehide, in mock solemnity. "An' us not hardly able to see our hole card!"

"And, just for that," laughed Trevis, "you both get an extra dose of stingum in your eyes in about fifteen minutes. Maybe to-morrow your hole cards won't look quite so big."

Two days later Trevis burst into the tent, grabbed up a blanket, and dashing out again, ran it up on the flag pole. "What's the matter," asked Moosehide Charlie. "Canoe comin'?"

"Canoe the devil!" answered Trevis. "It's a steamboat. She's coming downriver, too. I couldn't figure what the smoke was all about till she came busting around the bend a couple of miles above. I'd forgotten there was a steamboat on the river."

"It'll be Cap. Reddy," opined Camillo Bill. "He wintered up around Hootalinqua."

"She sees us!" cried Trevis, a few moments later. "She's heading in!" The sound of a whistle

blast cut short the words, and the three fell to and struck camp. By the time the boat had warped to the shore and thrown out her plank, the outfit was ready, and it was but the work of a few moments to hustle it aboard.

Chapter V

BACK IN DAWSON

WHEN the steamer warped up at Dawson near midnight, Brad Trevis hastened at once toward the little shack down near the sawmill where his sister lived with Duke Carnation. "Poor kid, she'll sure be surprised to see me," he muttered. "Duke's probably told her I was killed in that jam." When the shack hove into sight he noted that there was a light in the window, and again he muttered, viciously: "That damned Duke's probably out with Adèle Santois—and Madge in there waiting up for him! Camillo Bill has got him sized up about right. I suppose I ought to just knock hell out of him. There's one man the sourdoughs sure don't cotton to."

He reached the shack and tapped gently on the door. "You there, Madge?" he called. "It's Brad!"

The door was flung violently open, and the next instant a pair of arms were about his neck and his sister was talking and sobbing all at

once: "Oh, Brad—Brad! Is it really you—alive? Duke told me you were dead! He said you were out on the big jam when it let go, and that there wasn't a chance in the world that you hadn't been ground to pieces or drowned!"

Trevis laughed and reassuringly patted the woman's shoulder. "There, there, old girl—I'm all right. Duke had every reason in the world for believing I was dead. I was out on the jam when she let go. But luck was with me, and I managed to make shore."

"But—why didn't you go back to your camp? Duke said he waited a whole day after the jam went out, hoping that you might have made it."

"There were two reasons why I didn't go back to camp. In the first place, I landed on the opposite side of the river. And in the second place I had to go and find a couple of fellows who were snowblind on a creek a few miles above where I landed."

The woman looked puzzled. "How did you know about the men who were snowblind?" she asked.

"Why—didn't Duke tell you? An Indian came into camp and reported it. He had just crossed on the jam. The two men were helpless. It was up to me to go."

"And—Duke wouldn't go with you?" There was a note of bitterness in the voice that the girl could not conceal.

"No," answered Trevis. "He wouldn't go. It's all right. He's a married man—and I'm foot-loose. But, it's queer he didn't mention the Indian."

"No," she answered, wearily. "He didn't mention any Indian. He didn't mention the snowblind men, either. He said you were out on the jam chasing a thief who stole an outfit of clothing from you while you and Duke were hunting."

"Oh, he did, did he? He lied. Where is he now?"

The woman was quick to note the hardness of the tone. She laid a hand on his arm, and as she raised her eyes to his, Trevis saw that fresh tears wet her lashes. "He's—up there—at one of the saloons, I guess."

"Drinking?"

"No. Duke never drinks. But—oh, Brad—I'm afraid he's gambling. Ever since he returned from this trip he's been—so different. He stays out every night till almost morning. And when he comes home he's so—so cross and impatient—and he says terrible things. Oh,

Brad—sometimes I—I almost wish I had listened to you—and never married him!” Again Trevis noted the weary tone that crept into her voice: “I—I guess I’m becoming—disillusioned.”

“Buck up, kid!” said Trevis. “I’ll go hunt Duke up. I want a few words with him.”

As he turned to go, the woman laid a restraining hand on his arm: “Don’t—don’t quarrel with him, Brad,” she pleaded. “Don’t hurt him! Duke works hard for his dust, Brad, and he has a right to gamble with it if he wants to. I—I don’t care so very much—really. He’s afraid of you, Brad. And now that you’re back, maybe things will be different.”

“They will,” answered Trevis, in a voice that rasped hard. “A hell of a lot different!”

As he stepped through the doorway the woman followed. “Oh, Brad—promise me you won’t—won’t hurt him! I—I love him!”

Trevis hesitated just an instant, his eyes on the figure that stood framed in the light. Then, without a word, he turned and vanished into the night.

Brad Trevis’s lips were pressed grimly as he picked his way along the path that led toward the main thoroughfare of the rapidly growing camp. “Gambling, eh?” he muttered. “And she doesn’t even suspect the truth! The time’s come

for a show-down, and——” The muttered words were cut short by the sound of footsteps approaching at a run. Stepping into the shadow of a half-completed shack, he waited, and a moment later the figure of a man appeared running toward him. As the man reached the spot, Trevis stepped directly into the path, barring the way. The man was Duke Carnation, and by the dim starlight Trevis saw that his face was drenched with blood. But what surprised Trevis even more than the blood-smeared face was the look of abject terror in the eyes that stared wildly into his own. “Brad! Brad Trevis!” The name fell thickly from the man’s lips in a voice that was hardly more than a half-intelligible croak.

Trevis took one step toward him and the man cowered back, throwing out an arm as though to fend off an apparition. “Yes,” he answered evenly, “Brad Trevis. I’ve been down talking with Madge. I just started out to hunt you up. But—what’s the meaning of all the blood?”

“Blood?” A perplexed look crept into the horror-widened eyes, and he mumbled his words haltingly. “What do you mean, blood?”

“Why, the blood on your face. How did it get there? Who cut you? And why in hell didn’t he or she finish the job?”

Slowly the man's hand groped toward his face, and for a long moment he stood staring at the fingers that came away wet with blood. The sight seemed to clear his brain. He cast a swift look of fear over his shoulder. "I didn't know I'd been cut!" he said, hurriedly. "Let me go! I've got to get out of here! Frenchy LaBelle's gunning for me!"

The man essayed to pass, but Trevis reached out and, grasping him by the coat collar, thrust him roughly through the doorway of the roofless, half-completed shack. Stepping in after him Trevis stood blocking the doorway. He noticed that the hand that had grasped the collar was covered with blood. "Come clean," he said. "What's it all about?"

The first shock of meeting Trevis alive passed, leaving Duke Carnation's brain in a whirl of terror. How much did Trevis know? Of his story to Corporal Downey? Of the murder of the Indian? Good God! Why hadn't he sunk the Indian's body in the river instead of setting it afloat on the cake of ice? But he had been so sure that Brad Trevis was dead! The Indian had said that he couldn't possibly be alive—couldn't have made the other shore! And—here was Trevis, alive, to explain about the clothing, to

give the lie to the story he had told to the police and to Madge! They'd know, now, that he had been afraid to cross on the jam—that he had murdered the Indian! Damn the Indian—he had been so sure Trevis was dead! Just one tiny ray of hope penetrated the overwrought brain—that the body of the Indian might never be found. There were thousands of ice cakes in the river—grinding and milling together—going to pieces in rapids. The chance of anyone finding that particular cake was infinitesimal, even though he had hoped at the time that it would be found. It might well float a hundred—a thousand miles unnoticed by human eye. But there remained the story he had concocted—and the fact that he had refused to cross the jam to help men in distress! Well, they could brand him a coward and a liar—but they couldn't hang him for that. They might wonder at the disappearance of Moses Fox—but without the body they could prove nothing. He could say that the Indian had gone on about his business, and no man could gainsay him. Gradually his nerve returned. Even if they did find the body they would find it clad in Brad Trevis's clothing, and they would find the rifle that killed him—Brad Trevis's rifle—and Brad Trevis's footprints in the frozen slush

of the ice cake! If he stuck to his story Brad would have a hell of a time explaining that away! If he held his nerve, Brad Trevis might even yet swing for the murder of the Indian. But—Frenchy LaBelle—here was a very real, a very present menace. . . . The voice of Brad Trevis jerked his thoughts abruptly from the speculative to the concrete:

“Well—how about it?”

Carnation braced himself for an ordeal. “I didn’t know they were married—Adèle Santois and Frenchy LaBelle—honest to God, I didn’t! I thought they were just living together. I was up there—and Frenchy came home—and fumbled at the latch—and Adèle cried out that it was her husband and that he would surely kill me—and I went out through the window—it was then, I guess, I got cut—I hadn’t even noticed it! But I’m through with her—through with her forever! My God, Brad! If you could sidetrack Frenchy LaBelle, I’ll take Madge and hit out for the claim. She’s always wanted to go out into the hills.”

The evident terror in the man’s eyes was far more convincing than his words. It was very evident that so long as Frenchy LaBelle remained alive and militant, Duke Carnation

would steer a wide course around Adèle Santois. After a long moment of silence, during which his eyes seemed to bore the cowering man to his very soul, Brad Trevis spoke. "All right," he said, in a voice that sounded cold and hard as green ice. "I'll do what I can with Frenchy La Belle. Does he know you? Does he know you were the man who went out through the window?"

"No, he doesn't know me. I know him only by sight. No—I'm sure he couldn't have seen me—I went out through the window just as he crashed open the door."

"But—the woman? Wouldn't she tell him?"

"No. It would appeal to her to keep him guessing."

Trevis stepped one step closer to the man, and the deadly menace in his lowered voice caused the other to shrink from him. "I'll take the gaff. I'm not married. It don't make any difference about me. I'll disappear for a while—and no one except the woman will know that it was not I who went out through the window. But—get this, you damned yellow pup—I'm not doing this for you! It's for Madge. From now on you treat her right—and you run straight—or by God I'll make you wish it was Frenchy LaBelle instead of me you had met this night! I'm not

going so far that I can't come back—by a damned sight!"

Duke Carnation's heart leaped with sudden hope. He knew Brad Trevis. He knew that if Trevis said he would shoulder the blame, he would shoulder it—and no halfway shouldering, either. If Brad Trevis promised to do a thing he would do it though the heavens fell. And with Trevis out of the way—on the run—there would be no one to refute the story he had told to Corporal Downey, even though the body of the Indian were found. Carnation now found himself hoping that the body would be found—then Brad Trevis would be on the run for sure. He, Carnation, would see to it that the story of the window got around, and later if Trevis should be arrested for the murder of the Indian, the episode would go a long way toward discrediting him. Fate had played straight into his hand—and at just the moment when his luck seemed to be at its lowest ebb. Impulsively, he thrust out his hand. "That's damned white of you, old man!" he exclaimed heartily. "You may be sure that I won't forget it!"

Trevis ignored the hand. "You better not forget it," he answered, grimly. "Come on, let's get out of here. Wait—let's see how badly you're cut."

A superficial examination by the light of a match showed a two-inch gash along the hair roots. The bleeding had almost stopped. "Nothing serious," grunted Trevis. "You deserved a damned sight worse than you got. Just a minute, now, and I'll make my play good. I've already got plenty of blood on my hand." As he spoke, he drew a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed it with blood from Carnation's wound. Then, being careful to allow the blood to show, he bound it tightly about his own forehead. "How does it look?" he asked. "Convincing?"

"You look like you'd been in a battle," grinned the other. "By the way, Brad, have you got a gun on you? LaBelle's going to begin shooting the minute he sees that bloody bandage."

"I have no intention of harming LaBelle," answered Trevis. "And he's not going to see the bandage until I'm ready for him to see it." He drew his cap low over his forehead concealing the cloth. "Come along with me," he said, curtly. "You can't go home looking like that. You slip into Stoel's back room and clean up, while I hunt up LaBelle. And remember to wear your cap pulled low for a few days till that wound heals. Someone might ask questions."

Chapter VI

ON THE RUN

AS DUKE CARNATION slipped through a side door into the back room of Stoel's Gold Nugget Saloon, the biggest gambling house in camp, Brad Trevis entered the place through the front door. Save for bartenders and dealers and two or three late hangers-on, the big room was deserted. Trevis strolled over to where Stoel himself stood beside a faro table. The proprietor greeted him genially:

"Hello, Trevis! How's everything out in the hills? Don't want to take a hundred and fifty thousand for your claim?"

Trevis considered for a moment, and answered without a smile: "Tell you what I'll do, Stoel. I'll bet that claim against two hundred and fifty thousand."

Stoel stared at the man in surprise. Trevis had never been known to gamble. The hangers-on crowded closer. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Take out a stack of chips?"

"No. Turn one card—black you win—red I win."

Consummate gambler that he was, Stoel gasped: "A quarter of a million on the turn of a card! Well—you're on!" Reaching for a deck of cards, he tossed it to Trevis. "You shuffle," he said tersely. "I'll cut."

Trevis riffled the cards and laid them on the table, and as the hangers-on crowded close and stared in breathless silence, Stoel stepped to the table and cut the deck well toward the middle, and without himself glancing at it, held the exposed card toward Trevis.

"Ten of spades," announced Trevis. "The claim's yours." Stepping to the bar, he scribbled a transfer and shoved it across to Stoel. "So long," he said. "I'm in a hurry."

When Camillo Bill and Moosehide Charlie debarked from the steamboat, they made a bee line for the Antlers Saloon, a place that vied in popularity with Stoel's for the patronage of the camp. As they passed the new police headquarters, they were greeted by young Corporal Downey, who lounged in the doorway: "Hello, Camillo! Hello, Moosehide! Where you be'n?"

"Hello, Downey! Be'n upriver, kihootin' around in the hills."

"Hear about Brad Trevis?"

"What about him?"

"A big jam formed thirty, forty miles above here. Trevis was crossin' on it when it went out, an' he ain't be'n seen since."

"The hell he ain't," grinned Moosehide. "Who says so?"

"Fellow by the name of Duke Carnation reported it."

"That goddam yellow-bellied brother-in-law of his'n!" exclaimed Camillo Bill. "You bet yer life *he* wasn't out on no jam! Trevis is a man—an' a damn good one! He was out on the jam when she let go, all right—but he ain't dead, by a damn sight!"

"What!" cried Downey. "D'you mean he made it to shore?"

"Sure's shootin'. But, come on up to the Antlers. I'm so damn dry I can't spit till I soak up a drink er two."

Corporal Downey fell in beside the two old-timers and the three entered the saloon, to be vociferously greeted by Old Bettles and Burr McShane and Swiftwater Bill. Drinks were had all around, and for more than an hour Corporal

Downey and the others listened as the two told how Brad Trevis had crossed on the big jam and rescued them from their plight.

Then the door of the saloon opened, and Brad Trevis himself stepped into the room.

"Speak of the devil an' up he pops! Belly up, sourdough, an' wet yer whistle!" cried Old Bettles, himself the dean of the sourdoughs.

Trevis advanced to the bar with a smile. He was conscious of a distinct thrill at the words that thus publicly initiated him into the inner circle of the old-timers. He was one of them now—where always before he had felt that there was a difference. It was as though he had been on probation!

"Here's how!" cried Moosehide, when Trevis had filled his glass. "It ain't everyone that's smart enough to burn a rag on a bullet an' cure snowblind!"

"Yeah—an' it ain't everyone that's smart enough to skin a man's poke plumb lean before his eyes is good enough to git a right good peek at his hole card," supplemented Camillo Bill, grinning broadly.

"Yes—an' ridin' a billion-ton ice jam down the Yukon bareback ain't jest the sort of light exercise I'd recommend fer chechakos," laughed

Burr McShane. "The man that can do that is a sure enough sourdough, I claim."

"Uh-huh," commented Old Bettles, draining his glass and refilling it. "But all them things ain't sneeze-high in a whirlwind! The thing that counts was that he'd tackle the jam in the first place. That showed where his guts was. An' it's guts that makes sourdoughs—not brains. Hell's fire—take us, now—we wouldn't pan out one good three-star brain to the ton! But damn it—we're here!"

The door opened abruptly and into the room stepped a very giant of a man, a forty-five six-gun in his hand. Inside the door he paused as his blazing eyes swept the faces of the little group at the bar.

Old Bettles, noting the glaring eyes and the six-gun, chuckled: "What's the matter, Frenchy? Lookin' fer someone? If you be, I ain't him. Come on up an' have a drink."

The man advanced to the bar, glowering. "*Oui*, I'm hont som' wan! I'm hont wan beeg man w'at go t'rough my weendow an' smash her all to hell! By Gar, I fin' heem I'm shoot hees goddam guts out!"

The sourdoughs grinned, and Corporal Downey planned to get possession of the gun. Let's

hear about it, Frenchy," said Camillo Bill. "I'm fer' you. We're gittin' civilized, now. It's time this here window-bustin' was put a stop to."

"*Oui*—me, I'm down to Stoel—play de card—mak' de leetle bet on de w'eel. By-m-by I'm git tire'. I'm gon home. I'm com' on de door—she lock. I'm poun' on de door, an' I'm holler. I'm hear Adèle Santois holler out lak she scairt, an' I'm t'ink, ba Goss, som'wan else in de house, too. I'm git mad lak hell, an' I'm back oop an' tak' good ron an' jomp on de door, an' she bus' all to hell, an' I'm see wan beeg mans ain' wait fer nuttin'—she jomp rat t'roo de weendow, an' tak her 'long, sash an' all. Ba Gar, I ain' git good look at heem, but I fin' heem I'm shoot heem so full of holes lak you pants!"

Camillo Bill grinned and glanced ruefully at his nether garment. "That ort to keep him to home fer a while," he admitted. "An', since you called attention to 'em I guess I'll have to git me a new pair, or Downey here'll be runnin' me in fer skulldoggery with intent to mope. But about this here window-bustin' prank—wouldn't 'Dèle tell you who the gent was?"

"*Non, non!* She ain' tell me nuttin'! Ba Goss I'm slap her 'roun fer 'bout half an hour, an'

she git mad on me. She say, 'You go to hell, you beeg feesh! You wan' know so mooch, you go fin' out!' So I'm hont de man wit' de bloody face. He cut heemself on de glass w'en he jomp t'rough. I'm seen de blood on de sash w'at he car' 'bout hondre' feet hang roun' hees neck."

"Did you beat the woman up bad?" asked Corporal Downey, with professional gravity.

"*Non!* Mebbe-so black de eye leetle bit. She too damn queek. I ain' kin lay good slap on her." The huge man paused and felt gingerly of his chin with the tips of his fingers. "She ron roun' de room fas', an' wan tam she keek me in de jaw, an' w'en she git de beeg butcher knife, I grab ma gon an' com' way from dere. Ba Goss, w'en I'm fin' dat mans an' keel um, I mus' got to tak bottle of wine to Adèle so she ain' mad on me no mor'. Me, I'm t'ink wan 'omans is mor' troubles on a mans as whole team of dogs!"

"You spoke a chinful, Frenchy," opined Swift-water Bill, when the laughter had subsided. "Belly up. I'm buyin' a drink."

Brad Trevis moved along to make room for the Frenchman, who laid his six-gun on the bar as he reached for the bottle and glass that the next man shoved in front of him. Corporal Downey stepped to the man's elbow and was

reaching to secure the weapon when, quick as a flash, Brad Trevis forestalled him.

Cocking the gun, he stepped swiftly back from the bar, keeping the Frenchman covered. Every eye in the room widened in surprise as the sourdoughs noted that the hand that grasped the butt of the gun was covered with blood. At the same instant, with his other hand, Trevis pushed the cap back from his forehead, exposing the bloody bandage. "I'm the man you're looking for!" he announced in a cold, hard voice. "But you're not going to get me." Swiftly he backed to the door, and reaching behind him, opened it. "I'll leave your gun where you'll find it," he announced. "But don't try to follow me—or I might have to use it." The door slammed behind him, and for tense seconds utter silence reigned in the room.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Burr McShane.

"Me, too!" seconded Moosehide Charlie. "He told us, jest before he got off'n the boat, that he was goin' to see his sister! Didn't he, Camillo?"

"Uh-huh," said Camillo Bill, his brows contracted in a frown. "Uh-huh—that's exactly what he said—an' I reckon that's jest exactly what he done."

"What do you mean?" cried Old Bettles. "'Dèle Santois ain't his sister!"

"Not none whatever," agreed Camillo. "By God, Brad Trevis is what I call a man! He thinks a heap of his sister—I know that. An' the way I got it doped out—he's takin' the fall fer that damn brother-in-law of his—so his sister won't find out that her no-'count husban's be'n foolin' around with 'Dèle Santois."

"But hell's fire!" objected Old Bettles. "He was cut all to hell. Didn't you see his hand—an' the bloody rag on his forehead?"

"Yeah," admitted Camillo Bill, with a grin. "But I didn't see *under* the rag—an' neither did you. An' I didn't see no cut on his hand—jest blood. He was makin' his play good, that's all. Brad Trevis, he's smart. An', what's more," he added, letting his glance travel from face to face, "if Brad Trevis wants folks to think he's the guilty party, not a man in this room says otherwise—no matter what we think."

Interrupting the nods and expressions of approval, Corporal Downey addressed Moosehide Charlie and Camillo Bill. "There's jest one thing I want to ask you two," he said. "An' I want you to think good before you answer. When Brad Trevis got to your tent where you was snow-

blind, after crossin' the jam—had it froze up yet—or was it soft?"

"No, it hadn't froze," answered both in chorus. "After he got there," added Camillo Bill, "it rained pretty near all the rest of the day."

"Enough," asked Downey, "so that it would wash the blood off a dead man before it could thicken up an' freeze?"

"Hell, yes! It rained hard an' drizzled by spells."

"So long, then," said Corporal Downey. "I'm goin' out an' arrest a man named Duke Carnation fer the murder of an Injun named Moses Fox."

"Moses Fox!" cried Camillo Bill. "Why, he's the Siwash that crossed that jam fer help!"

Downey nodded. "I found his body dressed in Trevis's clothes floatin' on a cake of ice right where Duke Carnation wanted me to find it, with Trevis's rifle layin' beside it—the rifle that killed the Injun. Carnation thought Trevis was dead. He had a good story all cooked up to go along with the evidence. Carnation's smart, all right—but not quite smart enough."

As the officer disappeared through the door, Frenchy LaBelle, who had stood as a man in a daze since the moment Brad Trevis had covered

him with his own gun, leaped toward the door. But the sourdoughs blocked the way. "Ba Goss!" cried the Frenchman, "ain' he name Duke—de man w'at tak' ma gon? De man wit' de bloody head?"

"Hell—no!" explained Camillo Bill. "That's Brad Trevis——"

"But," interrupted the excited Frenchman, "de man w'at jomp t'rough de weendow—heem nam' Duke! Me, I'm hear dat w'en I'm stan' by de door an' try for open! Adèle, she holler: 'My God, Duke!' she say, 'Dat my husban'—dat Frenchy LaBelle!' An' den I bus' down de door an' seen heem gon out t'rough de weendow!"

Camillo Bill's lips set grimly. Without a word, he leaned far over the bar and from some recess beneath he produced a loaded six-gun which he handed to the Frenchman. "Better take this along," he said, evenly. "You might be quite a while locatin' yourn. This here Duke Carnation lives in that shack down by the sawmill. If you hurry, you might git there ahead of Downey. Moses Fox was a damn' good Siwash."

"Hold on!" cried Moosehide Charlie. "My God, Camillo! He can't go down there an' shoot the skunk, right in front of his wife. Remember, she's Brad Trevis's sister!"

"Carnation ain't down to his shack," interrupted a bartender who had come in shortly after the departure of Trevis. "He's over in Stoel's back room washin' a lot of blood off his face. I stopped in there jest a few minutes ago."

With a low cry of rage the Frenchman dashed for the door—and among the sourdoughs, not a hand was raised to stay him.

BOOK TWO

Chapter I
CUSHING'S FORT

OLD Cush, lean, and wise of eye, rested an elbow upon the corner of his bar and with professional disinterest watched Doc Milroy, the gambler, take the Portugee.

It was no concern of Cushing's who lost or won at his tables, or by what means a man was relieved of his dust. A hard man was Lyman Cushing—but a just man. A man who asked no questions—nor answered any. A man eminently fitted to preside over this outland barroom and trading post of peeled logs that snuggled into its background of spruce timber, on the verge of a high bluff overlooking the fast rushing White River.

The little community of men who forgathered to trade and to drink and to gamble at Cushing's Fort were men whose activities hither and yon had made it advisable that they remain away from the more thickly settled districts both of Alaska and of the Yukon. It was known that Old

Cush possessed uncanny knowledge of things men guarded as secrets. They feared this man with the pale blue eyes—but they respected him, and having sought sanctuary in the hills near the international border, they gladly availed themselves of the convenience of his bar and his trading room.

With the exception of Old Cush and his daughter, Doc Milroy, the gambler, was the only permanent resident of Cushing's Fort—others preferring to range the hills prospecting for the gold that lay in the gravel of gulches and unmapped creeks, where many claims were sluicing out better than wages. To be sure there were the Indians who, in winter by dog sled, and in summer by canoe, packed in Cushing's supplies, but they spent most of their time on the trail. Then, at times, there were wood choppers—but these were transients at best, working perforce of circumstance when they learned that Old Cush would grub-stake no man. When their needs were satisfied they would shoulder their packs and disappear into the high hills.

But Doc Milroy, being a man of skill rather than of toil, remained at the fort where artfully and dishonestly he took much dust from the sinkers of shafts and the sluicers of gravel. Then,

too, there was Nan Cushing—and Old Cush getting on in years, and all—and his reputed wealth . . . So Doc Milroy remained and prospered.

Down on the Yukon this little community was referred to as the White River gang, and Doc Milroy as its reputed leader. However, no gang, in the sense of an organization, existed—Doc Milroy being merely the dean of the outlaw community. Old Cush was the real king of White River, holding the health and happiness of many men in the hollow of an iron hand, but having no part in the outlawry of any man. To be tabooed at Cushing's Fort meant that a man must travel far and travel fast—it was many a long mile to the Yukon—and many more to the nearest post across the line in Alaska. And for the man who essayed either journey with a light pack, death lurked among the miles.

But down on the Yukon, since Carmack's strike on Bonanza, White River with its outlaws was forgotten.

The Portugee, an ill-vizaged world rover, who somewhere along life's pathway had paid with an eye for his fun, was in from the hills for supplies. With him he had brought a little sack that bulged heavy with dust. The supplies rested on the floor

beside his chair in his pack. The little sack that had bulged reposed limply in the pocket of his capote, its contents represented by the single stack of chips before him on the table—and many stacks before Doc Milroy.

With a thick, uncleanly thumb the Portugee raised a corner of his hole card as his single eye shot a reassuring glance at its pip. With a quick movement, more vicious than nervous, he shoved his stack to the center, calling the bet of the gambler.

Doc Milroy smiled as he flipped over his hole card. "Two pairs," he announced quietly. "Can you beat 'em, Portugee?"

The other slued his chair half about and fixed his eye balefully on Old Cush. "Len me fi' hondre. I com' back two week."

Cushing shook his head with a bored air. "Nothin' doin'. You know damn well I never stake no one fer gamblin'."

"Hell-damn! Ain' I always pay my debt?"

Doc Milroy stepped from the room, and the Portugee persisted: "I'm hones' mans. I'm pay back w'at I'm git."

Old Cush shrugged. "That ain't what they say down around St. Michaels. How about the thousan' you borrowed off the big Roosian,

Barazoff? Better'n ten year ain't it, Portugee, since you slipped out of St. Michaels in the night?"

"God'am to hell! You know dat, eh?"

"Yeah, Portugee—an' a lot more. It's my business to know. Yer good here fer yer lickin' an' supplies. But, fer a dollar's worth of dust—no!"

The single eye gleamed angrily. "Doc Milroy, he good fer de dus' fer de gamble!"

"Not an ounce. He banks with me. It's his dust I shove him when he wants it—not mine."

When Doc Milroy returned the Portugee had gone. He counted the chips onto the bar, and Cushing laboriously penciled a slip.

"Business isn't so good, lately," opined the gambler as he deposited the slip with a sheaf of similar slips in his wallet. Hardly were the words out of his mouth when bedlam broke loose outside—loud laughter, strange foreign curses—and louder laughter. Old Cush's lips twisted into a grin.

"Mebbe she'll pick up a leetle," he hazarded. "That'll be Louis Zang. An' by the sound, he's put the Portugee on his back. With him in camp my wood choppers won't be worth a damn fer three, four days—listen at 'em! There's some

business fer you, Doc. He's got a good claim, an' he'd ort to be ripe fer a killin'."

Doc Milroy slanted the older man a glance. "Sure," he answered, dryly. "He's always ripe for a killing. But I'm not ripe for a killee. He brags of two killings now—and I'm not so anxious for you fellows to hear him bragging of three. I don't want any of his meat. I tell you he's got a bad eye. Your eyes or mine might flash red in a rage. But no man ever saw him in a rage—yet the red's there behind the baby blue—all the time, deep down. He likes his liquor and his hell-roaring fun—but wait till someone crosses him. I don't mind taking part of his dust—but I'd hate to nick him till it hurt. I wonder if those two killings of his are real, or just brag."

"I couldn't say."

"How is it you've got such a damned good line on everyone else, if you don't know anything about him?" flashed Milroy.

"I didn't say I didn't know," reminded Cushing. "Listen to that. He's prob'ly puttin' three or four wood choppers on their backs to onct. I've seen him do it."

"Yes," said Milroy, frowning. "And listen to Nan yelling for him! She ought to have more sense than to fall for a big fourflusher like Zang

—with his blue capote, and his stocking cap, and his quill leggings. By God, Cush, if I were you I'd put a flea in her ear. He'd make you a hell of a son-in-law, wouldn't he?"

Cushing eyed the speaker stonily. "She knows men as good as I do. I'm leavin' the pickin' of a son-in-law to her."

Milroy sauntered to the doorway, where he stood with his shoulder against the jamb and watched three wood choppers try to put Louis Zang upon his back. Zang had disposed of one amid the encouraging cries and laughter of the onlookers. He stepped back to engage the others to advantage, tripped over a prowling dog, and sprawled full length upon his back. The next instant the two wood choppers had pinned his shoulders to the ground. It was the first time anyone had put Louis Zang upon his back. The yells and laughter redoubled, with Nan Cushing in the forefront cheering the discomfiture of the champion.

Laughing with the loudest, Zang regained his feet, and Doc Milroy wondered if it were only fancy that made the blue eyes glow red deep down.

"The drinks are on me! I'll buy!" bellowed Zang. "Belly up to the bar an' git yer nose paint!

An' then I'll bet five ounces to one that I can put any four of you lousy woodpeckers on yer back!"

Zang's roving eyes encountered the dog over which he had tripped. With a movement incredibly swift for one of his bulk, he reached down and grasped a hind leg in either hand. Still laughing, he straightened, whirled the ninety pound husky dog about his head and crashed him against a tree. There was a sickening sound as the brute's back struck the bole, followed by a low moaning whimper as Zang tossed the broken animal to the ground.

There was no laughter, now, among the men who had witnessed the brutality. Only Zang laughed. Milroy saw Nan Cushing's face go dead white as the dog raised himself pitifully upon his forefeet and, with pain-dulled eyes, strove to drag himself to the shelter of the thick spruce timber.

With a low cry the girl dashed for the ell that comprised the living quarters, to return a moment later with a rifle. Placing its muzzle against the back of the dog's head, she pulled the trigger.

Louis Zang laughed boisterously as he brushed bits of bark and gravel from the sleeve of his capote. "Hell! I thought fer a minute you was goin' to shoot me!"

The girl's voice rang tense as she met his laughter with scorn-flashing eyes: "I ought to shoot you! Someone ought! You dirty brute! You're not half as good as the dog I just did shoot!"

Zang hesitated as though to reply, but turned to the barroom door with a loud laugh. "Come on boys—I'll buy!"

Several of the wood choppers moved toward the door, but two or three picked up their axes and turned toward the wood. Again, from the doorway Doc Milroy caught the red glint in the baby blue eyes as Zang roared at the delinquents: "Come back here, goddam you, an' line up! When I buy, you drink! Or I'll wind a few of you around a tree like I done the dog!"

The men came. They drank. But there was nothing of geniality in the drinking. Nor was there any return round bought. Nor was Zang's challenge to put any four men upon their backs accepted.

Zang bought again—and yet again, striving by forced laughter and boisterous words to instill something of the hilarity that was wont to enliven his sprees. The result was a signal failure. The men drank because Louis Zang commanded them to drink. No man dared flout Louis Zang.

In disgust the huge swashbuckler turned to

Doc Milroy. "What the hell's the matter?" he demanded, querulously. "You'd think it was a funeral. An' you, damn you—if you won't laugh, mebbe you'll play cards! An' don't tell me you've broke yer wrist an' can't deal, neither!"

Milroy smiled. "My wrist is working," he said.

Zang slanted him a keen glance. "Jest see that it don't work too good." He tossed a pouch onto the bar. "Weigh her up, Cush, an' shove me the chips—an' there's plenty more where that come from."

The game proceeded, with Milroy winning steadily but unobtrusively. Zang drank whiskey freely as he played, becoming more and more sullen as he drank—which was unlike him when in his cups. There were lapses into loud-mouthed ribaldry, during which he bet recklessly and laughed loudly when he lost or won. He repeatedly roared his boast that he had killed two men—and would as lief kill a dozen more.

Milroy hoped the drunken bully would tire of the game. Once he himself suggested that they cash in. But Zang, pointing to his depleted stack of chips, loudly demanded a run for his money. The gambler humored him.

Chapter II

LOUIS ZANG GOES TO SLEEP

INTO the room stepped a stranger. He swung a depleted pack from his shoulders, stepped to the bar, motioned the two at the table to join him, and ordered a round of drinks.

Now, the habitués of Cushing's Fort were suspicious of strangers. The eyes of the two players met in swift glance. They tossed their cards to the table and stepped to the bar, ranging one on either side of the newcomer.

When the drinks were poured the latter raised his glass. "I'm Brad Trevis," he announced, abruptly, "from down on the Yukon. Here's how."

They drank, and Old Cush shoved the bottle toward them. "Fill up," he invited. "This 'un's on the house. Cushing's the name. This here layout—they call it Cushing's Fort."

Doc Milroy bought a round, introducing himself, then Zang thumped the bar with his fist: "Now, have one on me!" he bellowed.

"Zang's my name—Louis Zang—Z-A-N-G, Zang! An' it's nobody's damn business where I come from, nor where I'm headin'. An' what's more I can put any son of a sea cook on his back that ever stood on two legs—fer the drinks, or fer the dust—that's me!"

Glass in hand, Doc Milroy took swift appraisal of the stranger. "Six foot of bone and good meat," his brain registered. He wondered whether the man would accept Zang's challenge.

Trevis was regarding Zang with a good-natured smile. "Glad to know you, I'm sure, Zang," he said. "I got the name right, did I? You do look right husky. And, barring an obvious enlargement of the ego, you should live a long time. Here's how!"

Doc Milroy grinned thinly as the huge bully scowled into the smiling face and snarled a further boast: "I ain't never be'n sick a day in my life! An' in this neck of the woods it's the man that minds his own business that lives longest!"

"That," said Trevis, "is the thought I strove, in my blundering way, to convey. I'll buy a drink."

He turned to Cushing, who stood sphinx-like behind his bar. "I lost a good claim on a gamble down Yukon way," he said. "And that, together

with certain reasons of my own, induced me to try my luck here."

"Sporting man?" asked Milroy, with interest.

"No—the veriest tyro when it comes to gambling." He grinned and indicated the half-depleted little pouch from which Old Cush had weighed the dust for the drinks. "That's my pile—hardly enough to finance a trip into the hills."

"I'm payin' an ounce a day fer wood chop-pin'," suggested Cushing.

"Friend," exclaimed Trevis, "you've hired a hand! I'll work till I've gathered an outfit."

Louis Zang had had a bad day. There had been Nan Cushing's scathing contempt—the attitude of the wood choppers—his losses at cards—and this stranger whose manner of speech was only half comprehensible to him. The liquor had taken strong hold. And Doc Milroy, glancing past Trevis, noted that the baby blue eyes glowed, deep down—red—like the banked fires of hell.

Cushing was speaking: "You ort to lay up enough in a couple of weeks fer a trip in the hills," he opined, pushing the bottle forward.

Trevis shook his head. "Thanks," he said, "I've had enough. A competent wood chopper should, as I see it, be able to land two consecutive blows——"

A ham-like fist banged the bar. "I'm Louis Zang! An' I can put any damn tin horn on his back that comes b'ilin' in where he ain't wanted, an' talks like a damn fool when he gits here!"

There was a movement—incredibly swift. There were sounds—the impact of a hard-driven fist—the clashing of teeth upon teeth—the heavy thud with which Louis Zang struck the floor—and the thin tinkle of glass on the back bar. Then the uninterrupted flow of the stranger's words: "—at least on the same tree. So, if you will provide me with an ax and show me the timber, I'll go to work."

Doc Milroy softly breathed an oath as he glanced from the smiling Trevis to the huge figure that sat blinking foolishly upon the floor.

Old Cush never batted an eye. "Mebbe *one* of them, what you said, 'executive blows' to a tree would do," he commented, dryly. "That is, if a man's *plumb competent*."

A silvery laugh rang through the room and all eyes turned to see Nan Cushing standing framed in the doorway, the full white throat that rose from the open collar of her shirt rippling to the peals of laughter that issued from between red lips. The laughter penetrated the whirling brain

of Louis Zang, who pawed clumsily as though to brush cobwebs from before his eyes.

Brad Trevis, standing motionless before the bar, thought the girl the most beautiful he had ever seen. Their eyes met, and for long, long moments they held. Unconsciously he took half a step toward her. And then she was gone.

But Old Cush had seen. And Doc Milroy.

Louis Zang struggled awkwardly to his feet. He swayed dizzily, pawed the air, and lurched heavily against the bar, where he reached for the whiskey bottle and drank deeply. "I'm drunk," he mumbled, thickly. "S'm'p'in' hit me. I'm Louis Zhang, 'n I c'n put any damn man on his back in the worl'. I'm goin' lay down. I wan'na shleep." He sagged slowly to the floor and rolled against the bar, where for hours he snored entirely oblivious of the fact that the wood choppers who had crowded in upon hearing the girl's laugh took unholy delight in using his gaudily capoted form in lieu of the hob-dented brass rail during round after round of drinks.

Chapter III

THE WOOD CHOPPER

ON THE morning of the second day of his wood chopping, Brad Trevis looked up to see Nan Cushing regarding him with a quizzical smile. He paused in his work of lopping the limbs from a prostrate spruce, and returned the smile. "Good-morning," he said.

"How did you do it?" she asked.

"I cannot tell a lie. I did it with my little hatchet." He held up his ax in mock solemnity.

"Oh, I don't mean the tree," she laughed. "I mean Louis Zang."

"Louis Zang was drunk," he countered.

"Yes—and that's just when you've got to look out for him."

"I looked out for him as best I could," he answered. "He was getting personal, and I didn't want to have to lick him."

The girl giggled. "But what did you hit him with—and how? Both Dad and Doc Milroy were looking right at you, and neither of them saw it done. You must be quick as lightning."

Trevis laughed. "A slow blow would be a push," he explained. "Never push a man. Hit him—or leave him alone."

The girl's eyes became serious. "You're the first man that ever floored him. He'll never forget that."

"I hope not, or I'll have it to do all over again."

"Louis Zang is a dangerous man," answered the girl, gravely. "He boasts of two killings. And I saw him pick a dog up and deliberately break his back against a tree—it was the same day you hit him."

"Score one for the dog," smiled Trevis. "But I don't believe Zang is dangerous—he just thinks he is. A braggart is generally a coward—and certainly nobody but a rank coward would break a dog's back against a tree."

"Just the same, he *is* dangerous—dangerous and treacherous—and you must watch out for him. He'll try to get you some way or other. And he's terribly strong. I've seen him throw three or four wood choppers at once."

"W-h-e-e-u," whistled Trevis, in feigned terror. "Maybe I'd better quit my job."

"What are you chopping wood for?" the girl asked suddenly.

"For an ounce a day."

The eyes of the girl rested for a moment upon the freshly chopped stump of the tree. "But you're no wood chopper."

Trevis grinned broadly. "I'm no grand opera singer, either. But if I was broke and someone offered me an ounce a day to sing in grand opera—I'd sing."

"Do you like to chop wood?"

"No, indeed! There's a whole lot of wood that I'll never chop. In fact, I'm only chopping myself into a grub stake. Then I'm going to hit for the hills."

"Are you a prospector?"

"Oh, yes. A very successful one. That's why I'm chopping wood for a grub stake."

"Why aren't you down on the Yukon? They say they're taking it out by the shovelful there."

"A man can only be in one place at once," he answered, "and I'm here."

The girl turned abruptly away. She could feel the blood mounting to her cheeks. She felt rebuff in the words, and she knew the rebuff was deserved. At Cushing's Fort the direct question was never asked. But this man had seemed, somehow, so different. But—all men were alike! They all had something to conceal—something

to run away from. All except her father—but—how did she know? Maybe he, too. . . . Her brain was racing. She had taken but few steps when the man's voice halted her:

"Where you going," he asked, "with all that gun?"

She turned. He stood leaning on his ax, smiling. It was a nice voice, she decided. Not husky, nor whining—nor was it the bellowing voice of Louis Zang. "I bet he *could* sing," she thought, "—better than he can chop wood." Aloud, she answered, "Moose hunting." And added: "To get meat for—wood choppers."

"I'm a moose hunter, too," he announced, eagerly. "Almost as good a moose hunter as I am a prospector. And I'm a really great *assistant* moose hunter!"

Despite herself, the girl laughed. "How about the ounce?" she reminded him.

"Oh, yes—I'd forgotten the ounce. It isn't everyone, you know, that can make a man forget gold."

Again she turned abruptly away, and this time she kept going, heading for the moose pastures above. Again she knew that her cheeks were flaming, but this time not because of rebuff. . . . "He has a good face, too—not puffed,

nor sagged, nor dirty—nor white and soft like Doc Milroy's—his face had sweat on it. He *is* different—and it served me right."

That day she hunted moose with a strange new singing in her heart. The miles were as nothing to her feet. On the edge of a slack water pond she dropped a young bull in the water and had to wade in waist-deep to bleed him. Swinging back, she shot a prime cow that she unexpectedly jumped in a deep gulch close to the river—a running shot—a hard shot, what with the scrub spruce and all—a shot that anyone might be proud of. She must hurry home so the boys could gut the animals and pack the meat in.

In the shelter of the spruce she paused and for a long time watched Brad Trevis toiling over his job of making firewood out of tall spruce poles. More than once she smiled at his clumsy efforts—as a mother might smile at a child. "He's just a boy," she thought. "Just a great big boy." Then she stepped into the clearing.

He straightened at sight of her and wiped his face with a handkerchief he drew from his hip pocket. The others, she remembered, used their sleeves.

"Back so soon!"

"Yes," she answered, "after assistant moose hunters."

Promptly he struck his ax into a stump. "Let's go!" he said.

"Oh, but we've got to get the others."

"Why do we need the others?"

She laughed. "Why, because even a really great assistant moose hunter couldn't possibly pack in two moose. And," she added roguishly, "meat packing is credited the same as wood chopping. The ounce won't suffer."

"Again," he said, gravely, as he fell into step beside her, "I had forgotten the gold."

From the doorway of the barroom Doc Milroy watched them cross the clearing. He turned abruptly away, and when the two entered the room he was seated at a table, softly riffing the cards.

Chapter IV

TREVIS HITS FOR THE HILLS

FOR two weeks Brad Trevis remained at Cushing's Fort, sweating the long days through with his ax, and crawling, dog tired, between his blankets at night. Men emerged from the hills singly, for the most part, or in pairs; remained for a day's trading or a week's debauch, and faded again into the hills. These men accepted Trevis without question—because he was at Cushing's. Then, too, moccasin telegraph had carried afar the story of the flooring of Louis Zang, so that he became at once a sort of elder hero among men who regard physical prowess a virtue rather than an accident of birth. Secretly, men appraised him. Doc Milroy was wont to relate with gusto of the single, lightning-like blow that had floored Zang. To all appearances Doc Milroy placed upon the newcomer the stamp of his highest approval. But the mind of Doc Milroy ran in channels, devious as deep.

Of Nan Cushing Trevis thought much—but

saw little. A nod—a wave of the hand, as she passed his clearing—a bit of half-bantering chatter as upon two or three other occasions he accompanied her with the others to pack in her kill. He knew, by this time, that Old Cush was reputed wealthy. So he sweated for his ounce a day—and always with his eyes on the far hills. . . . Sometime . . . He begrudged the days of his bondage, and counted his slowly accruing ounces in terms of supplies. And always his thoughts were upon the unmapped creeks and gulches and valleys—and the gold that lay hid in their gravel.

And, intuitively, the girl divined the reason for his seeming indifference, and with the passing of the days her respect for him grew. And more and more she found herself wondering why he was not down on the Yukon where, report had it, men were shoveling out gold by the scoopful.

One morning Trevis confronted Old Cush in the barroom. The older man swung the bottle onto the bar. "Ain't workin' to-day?"

"No. I'm cashing in my time for supplies."

"Goin' to try yer luck in the hills, eh?"

"Going out and make my strike."

"H-m-m-m," mused Cush, as the two filled their glasses, "better not count on nothin' much

better'n wages. There's a few got pretty good claims—but not many. Nothin' like down on the Yukon."

"I had a good claim, but I bet it on the turn of a card against two hundred and fifty thousand—and lost. I wanted to get out of there."

"Um-hum," said Cush, indifferently, "some does. 'Tain't likely you'll make no strike like that around here. How'd you like to stick around the fort? I figger I could mebbe dig up couple ounces a day fer a good man to kind of help look after things—spell me off at the bar, an' in the tradin' room, an' sort of look after things ginerally."

Brad Trevis shook his head. "Thanks, Cush, but I can't do it. Two ounces a day is no object to me at all—nor four—nor ten. What I want is a strike. Maybe when I first struck here I'd have considered it—but not now. Here's luck to you!"

"Same to you! Well, I s'pose we better be gittin' at them supplies."

An hour later, with Trevis's well-filled pack at his feet, the two again faced each other across the bar. The younger man eyed the other with a smile. "When this stuff's gone, if I haven't made my strike, I may be back working out another outfit at an ounce a day."

"Listen to me, son," said Old Cush. "You don't need to work out no more outfits with me. Jest come in when you want it, an' git what you need. Yer good here fer anything you want. An' if you don't make no strike, why most any crick you rip into will pay you better'n wages. This here country don't pan out so big—but she's stidy."

"Thanks, Cush. I won't forget that. I—I wonder if Nan's around anywhere?"

"No. Nan ain't here. She's off to hell an' gone somewheres luggin' some grub to some Siwashes. By God, if a Injun kid gits the bellyache anywheres between here an' the coast, an' she hears about it, they ain't nothin' elst but she should pack up a outfit an' go find out about it. It's what's kep' me pore."

The lips behind the drooping mustache were unsmiling, but Brad Trevis detected a twinkle in the cold blue eyes, and he smiled. "Oh, well—a woman's got to have someone to look after."

"Yeah, but I don't see no call to adopt a hull damn tribe! What she needs is a man."

Brad nodded, emphatically. "And a damned good man," he said.

"Huh," grunted Old Cush, with the nearest approach to a grin Trevis had yet seen on his

lips, "you spoke a piece, son. It would take a damn good man to handle her. I be'n tryin' it fer twenty year—an' I ain't got nowheres!"

Brad Trevis laughed. "Someone's done a mighty good job, Cush," he said, as he struggled into his pack. "Well—so long. I'll be hitting the trail."

"So long, son—an' good luck. By the way, if I was you I'd sort of keep a weather eye on Zang."

"I'm not afraid of Zang."

Old Cush bit largely into a plug of tobacco and nested his quid with deliberation. "I didn't say nothin' about bein' afraid of him, did I? When you git more hair on yer chin you'll larn that they's a damn sight of difference between fearin' a man an' watchin' him."

"You're right, Cush. I'll remember. Good-bye."

One afternoon a few days later, Doc Milroy pushed his chair from the table, where he had been playing solitaire, and sauntered to the bar, where Old Cush was laboriously scanning a month-old Seattle newspaper. "So Trevis has hit for the hills, eh?" he observed, casually, leaning an elbow on the bar.

"Yeah," answered Cushing, without looking up from his newspaper.

"Wonder what he quit the Yukon for?"

"Couldn't say."

"Have you got any line on him at all, Cush?"

"Plenty."

Cushing had not yet looked up from his paper, and Milroy drew his wallet from his pocket, and with a pencil totaled the amount of his slips. He gazed speculatively at the sum for a moment, and with a glance about the room to assure himself they were alone, he spoke: "How'd you like to go in on a proposition with me, Cush?" he asked.

"What kind of a proposition?" countered Cushing, carefully folding his paper and laying it on the back bar.

"A sure thing."

Old Cush unenthusiastically shifted his quid. "Fer me? Er you?"

"Why, for both of us, of course. They're shoveling out a hell of a lot of gold down on the big river. All the lower Yukon camps have gone *peshak* and everyone's hitting for this new camp of Dawson. It's big, I tell you—and no one knows how big—because no one's hit bed rock yet."

"Why don't you go down an' git you some of it?"

"What! Me slosh around in the muck when I

can make more than any of 'em sitting at a table in a warm room. Every man to his trade; Cush. Mine's cards."

"Yeah—an' mine's tradin'. I've stuck to it fer quite a spell."

"Sure—and you've got more—and got it easier than any man on White River. I'm not asking you to pull stakes. I'll look after the Dawson end. The chechakos are beginning to pour in there, already—and by next year she'll be a hell-roaring camp, for sure. The man that's in there first with a big saloon and gambling layout is is going to clean up big—big, I mean—millions. And you've got a lot of dust that isn't doing you a damn bit of good."

"Liable to rot on me, eh?"

The gambler grinned. "It might as well rot, for all the good it's doing you. You and I could open a big place—give 'em anything they want. We could divide the profits, say—forty-sixty. That would be giving you a big cut if I run the place, and what I know about the cards, and all. I've got forty thousand. You match it, and I'll go down. A place like I'm thinking about can't start on a shoestring."

"Um-hum. So you're figgerin' on a pair of shoestrings, eh? Well—tellin' you about me—

I've noticed that if the first shoestring goes to hell the mate to it don't never do nothin' prominent."

"But this is a sure thing, Cush. We begin to cash right from the start."

"*We* don't. Not me an' you. Not down on the Yukon."

Milroy flushed. "What's the matter? Don't you trust me?"

"Sure I do. But not with forty thousan' dollars of my dust—not from here to the wood-pile."

"Hell—haven't I always played square with you? Didn't I tell you when I first hit here that I was wanted over in Alaska for knocking a man off?"

"Yeah. But you fergot to mention how you bilked yer pardner, Soapy Smith, out of eighteen thousan' down to Skagway. Only, the name wasn't Milroy, then."

The gambler was taken by surprise. "Soapy Smith's a damned crook!" he blurted.

"Yeah. An' if he couldn't keep cases on you right in the same camp, how in hell would you expect me to—an' you way down on the Yukon?"

"Soapy had it coming."

"Mebby—but I ain't."

"Hell, Cush—you don't think I'd bilk you, do you?"

"Nope. I know damn well you won't."

"Who told you about that Soapy Smith deal?"

The older man eyed the gambler coldly. "Git this," he said, tersely. "I never tell no one nothin', about nothin'. I ain't no policeman. Neither I ain't no newspaper. What any man does is his own business. An' if I happen to know about it—that's mine."

Chapter V

THE RETURN OF LOUIS ZANG

IT WAS a month after the departure of Brad Trevis before Louis Zang again appeared at Cushing's Fort. There had been good water, and much sluicing, and a good many of the outlaw-prospectors had forgathered for high revelry. Zang breezed in with his usual swagger and thumped his pouch upon the bar. "I'm Louis Zang! An' I can put any damn man on his back that ever r'ared up on his hine legs!"

A silvery laugh greeted the words from the direction of the doorway, and Zang whirled to see Nan Cushing's white teeth flash in the sunlight. Then she was gone. With a scowl, his eyes swept the faces of the men in the room. All were grinning.

"What the hell's the matter with you-all?" he roared. "Goddam you! If you don't believe it, step out here on the floor—any one of you! Any two!" Still the men grinned—the men at the bar and the men at the tables. "Any three!" He

glared from face to grinning face. Men were turning from him now—some to resume their interrupted card games, some to their drinking at the bar. Then it was that Louis Zang realized that he was being ignored. The idea took form slowly. It was new. Heretofore men had good-naturedly accepted his challenge and had been duly laid upon their backs. It was his mode of self-expression—that he should lay men upon their backs in good-humored rough-and-tumble. But now the attitude of these men had changed. Heretofore men had greeted him hilariously, and rough horseplay had marked the duration of his stay. He had been a man among them—the best man. But now he had lost caste. Men were ignoring him; worse, they were laughing at him—even Nan Cushing had laughed. Zang refused to accept the situation. With a bellow he tried again: “Come on, you frost hounds, an’ gravel hogs! Belly up! I’m buyin’ a drink—me—Louis Zang!” He turned to Cushing. “Set ’em out, Cush—let ’em drink on Louis Zang!”

Those at the bar drained their glasses and refilled them. A few stragglers and lookers-on at the card tables sauntered indifferently to the bar, but the players for the most part remained seated—all but Doc Milroy, who tossed his cards

onto the table and took his place beside the huge swashbuckler. "How goes it, Zang?" he asked, as he poured the liquor into his glass.

Men drank with perfunctory "How" and "Here's lookin' at you"—but there was no zest, no life in the drinking. They drank and turned from the bar.

"What the hell's got into everyone? You'd think it was a miner's meetin', instead of a jamboree," asked Zang of Doc Milroy as they remained almost alone at the bar.

The gambler winked knowingly. "Remember Trevis?" he asked.

"Trevis?"

"Yes, Brad Trevis—the stranger that came in the last time you were here."

Louis Zang stared frowning into his empty glass. Presently he nodded slowly. "Sure. I remember. Talked funny, or somethin', didn't he? I didn't like him. I don't remember so good. I got drunk, or somethin' hit me, or somethin'. An' Nan Cushing laughed. Damn her, she's always laughin'! But I'll show her, sometime! What about this tin horn—kill somebody, or somethin'?"

Milroy regarded the other with a thin-lipped smile. "He killed you—socially."

Zang scowled. "Whatcha mean—socially? What's everyone grinnin' about?"

"Just this," explained the gambler. "You said something hit you, and you're right. It was Trevis hit you—and he knocked you for a row of comets. He hit you just once and you went to sleep for all the afternoon."

"I must of be'n drunk."

"You were—but I've seen you handle three or four men when you were drunker. You've got no alibi, Zang. He's a better man than you are—and everyone knows it. That's why they're laughing."

"The hell he is!" cried Zang, refilling his glass and banging his fist on the bar. "It's a damn lie! There ain't no better man than me—nowheres! I'm Louis Zang! Where is the damn hunk of tripe? I'll show him! Fetch him on, an' by God, I'll knock him flatter'n a squaw track! They'll be laughin' out of the other side of their mouth when I git through with him!"

"He's not here," said Milroy, noting the red that smoldered deep in the other's eyes. "He's out in the hills. Chopped wood for Cush till he got him an outfit, and then hit the trail. But he'll be back. He's due any day, now. I figure his grub must be just about used up. The thing

for you to do is to stick around till he shows up. You'll never be worth a damn in this camp again till you lick him—and lick him good."

Zang gulped his liquor and scowled into the face of Milroy. "What's his name, agin?" he asked.

"Trevis—Brad Trevis. Says he's from down on the Yukon."

Zang's fist banged the bar and his mighty voice bellowed through the room: "Where's this here Brad Trevis? Where's he at? Le'me git to him! The lousy tin horn! He socked me when I was drunk an' wasn't lookin'! I'll fix him! I'll hit him so hard they'll have to chop him out of the wall! I'll h'ist him so damn high he'll go through the floor when he lights! Fetch him to me! I'm Louis Zang—an' I'm r'arin' to go! Come up, you-all, an' have a drink on Louis Zang! If he ain't here now—he'll be here! An' by God, I wait fer him—if I have to stand here till the maggots carry me out the keyhole!"

Men flocked to the bar and drank. Here was something definite. Maybe this Trevis had hit Zang when he wasn't looking. They had only Doc Milroy's word for it. Old Cush had seen the fracas—but Cush never talked. Anyhow Zang had committed himself. To be sure, Trevis was

elsewhere when he had hurled his threats—but he had hurled them far and wide. He had gone too far to retract. He had said he would wait. And Trevis would be in soon, now—maybe today. He would have to come in for supplies. God! If this Trevis was the man Doc Milroy said he was—what a fight they would see! A fight that would make history in the Northland. They drank—again and again—and hoped that Trevis would come.

Bets were laid. Doc Milroy, slipping about among the crowd, got twenty ounces down on Trevis. Men had seen Zang handle several wood choppers at once—big men, too.

One Britton, wanted in Alaska, had just returned from the Yukon. He spoke up when the turmoil had somewhat subsided. "Trevis?" he said. "Brad Trevis? So this is where he skipped to, huh?"

Men crowded about him. "You know him?"—"What did he skip fer?"—"What's on him?"—"Give us the dope."

"Well," admitted Britton, thus confronted, "what's on him—you might say, it ain't so much except the skippin' out, instead of stickin' around like a man. They was a feller's wife—an' the feller went home one night, an' someone goes

on out through the winder a-wearin' the sash fer a necktie. The feller gits heeled an' goes gunnin' fer Trevis, which Trevis beats it down to the Antlers Saloon an' has him a pow-wow with Camillo Bill, an' Moosehide Charlie, an' Old Bettles, an' some more of the sourdoughs which was friends of his'n. But it looks like they wouldn't back him up in no sech play, 'cause, in a hell of a hurry, he hunts up Stoel an' bets his claim agin' a quarter of a million on the high card an' loses. Then he takes it on the run, in the dark—an' he ain't been seen sence."

The recital was followed by loud laughter, and more Zang money appeared. But now Doc Milroy refused it. If Trevis had skipped out rather than face an irate husband, he was no man to back against Louis Zang. There were even those who averred that he tried to hedge.

Louis Zang sensed the swing of the pendulum toward him. He made sure that no more Zang money was being covered. Seizing his bulging pouch which lay before him on the bar, he brought it down with a mighty thud. "All of it—er any part!" he roared. "Dust talks! Dust howls an' bellers that Louis Zang'll lick that damn yeller-bellied cur till he whines, an' whimpers, an' goes ki-yiin' back to the Yukon with his

tail between his legs! I'll put him to sleep so long that his hair'll be grow'd to the floor when he wakes up! All, er any part of it! Where's the takers? You would grin at Louis Zang! Where's yer Trevis money? Take it—you grinnin' tin horns——”

“It's took.”

Calmly from behind the bar Old Cush reached and drew the sack toward him and carried it to the scales, where he proceeded to weigh it, amid the hushed scrutiny of all eyes. “She weighs up ninety-two ounces,” he announced, “sack an' all.” Then he slipped the sack into his safe.

To say that men were astounded would be putting it mildly. No man had ever seen Old Cush lay any bet before.

Louis Zang's face was a study. The red glint faded from his eyes. His jaw sagged, and he stared stupidly as the other weighed the dust. When it thudded into the safe, he found his voice—not the bellowing voice of his challenge, but a fawning, conciliatory voice: “Aw, Cush. Say—I come on in to have a jamboree. The bet lays—but gi'me back the dust. I'll pay up if I lose—I sure will.”

“Yer good fer the jamboree, Zang,” said Cush. “All the lick'er you want—an' all the supplies.

But a bet—that's different. The dust lays where she is."

Astounded as he was by Cushing's bet, Doc Milroy tried to climb onto the band wagon, and industriously circulated around again offering money on Trevis—but the men had noted the change in Zang and kept their dust in their pockets. Watching his chance, the gambler edged to the corner of the bar and whispered: "Say, Cush, let me in on that bet—I'll take it over—all, or any part."

"She's all right wher' she lays," answered Cushing. "Go out an' git you some bets. They's plenty of Zang money offered."

"There *was*, you mean. But since you made that bet there isn't a damned ounce."

"H-m-m-m," said Cushing. "Now, that's funny, ain't it?"

Men began to speculate upon Trevis's probable return to the post. "Hell—he's liable not to show up fer a week, or a month!"

"He's got to. He only took a month's grub, an' he's due to be ett through to the bottom, right now."

"Maybe he's a moose chewer. Hell—give me a handful of salt an' a pound of tea, an' a rifle, an' I'll stay out all summer if I have to."

"Sure—but he don't have to. Who the hell's goin' to eat meat straight when he can git flour an' fixin's in half a day's trip."

"Half a day? How do you know where he's at?"

"He rolled him up a pole shack over on the east fork of Little Caribou. I helped him with the roof poles—it's three weeks ago."

"Yeah, but he ain't there. I come by there day before yesterday an' it don't look like no one's be'n livin' in the shack fer a couple of weeks er so."

"Where in hell would he be?"

"Mebbe he's hauled freight."

"Where would he go? He ain't got grub enough to reach no Alasky camp, an' 'tain't likely he'd hit back fer the Yukon when he jest come from there."

"Prob'ly prospectin' somewhere's in the hills. He'll be in."

"Gawd, I wisht he'd hurry. I got more sluicin' to do—but I hate like hell to miss anythin'."

And so the speculation ran, while Louis Zang, fortified by more liquor, assumed something of his usual bravado and bellowed his threats and dire prophecy.

Doc Milroy strolled to the open door and surprised Nan Cushing seated on a box close beside it, ostensibly examining the feet of a dog. He smiled. "Mr. Zang," he said, "is a whole lot on the prowl."

The girl's lips curled and she looked up into his face. "Doc, I wish you'd stop that fight."

"Stop it! Who—me? Not by a jugful! I've got too much money up on it, for one thing—and besides, the man that horned in to stop that fight would get lynched. The boys are hell-bent to see the fun. What's the matter—afraid Louis Zang will get hurt?"

"I hate Louis Zang," she answered. "I've hated him like poison ever since I saw him break that poor dog's back."

Doc Milroy's eyes narrowed slightly, though his lips continued to smile. "Oh, so it's Trevis you're afraid will get hurt. By the way, I heard a good one on Trevis. Britton's just up from the Yukon, and——"

"I heard him tell it," interrupted the girl, rising angrily to her feet. "It's a dirty lie—and I don't believe a word of it—so there!" She turned abruptly away, and Doc Milroy watched her cross the clearing and disappear into the spruce thicket, closely followed by her dogs.

Chapter VI

THE FIGHT AT CUSHING'S FORT

HARDLY had the girl entered the timber than she came face to face with—Brad Trevis. She noted the sparkle of his eyes and the white, even teeth that flashed behind his smile. "Nan," he said, simply, "it's good to see you again!" He stepped toward her, hand extended, but she drew back, staring into his face. "What's the matter? You look like you were seeing a ghost."

"Don't go in there!" she cried, pointing toward the fort where the loud voice of Louis Zang could be heard bellowing across the clearing.

"Why not?"

"Louis Zang's there, and he's getting drunk, and he's threatened to fight you. He's spent hours telling what he'll do to you, and the others are egging him on. I told you he'd never forget what you did to him that day at the bar."

"And I told you that if he didn't forget, I'd have it all to do over again."

"Oh—but you mustn't go in there. Suppose—

suppose, he'd—kill you, or something. He's so much bigger, and he's pretty drunk."

"Score one for the defense," grinned Trevis. "I'm pretty sober."

"Listen," cried the girl. "No one need ever know you came in. Wait here and I'll slip you some grub—enough for a couple of weeks—and you hit back into the hills. He'll be gone by that time, and so will the others."

Trevis laughed. "Can't do it, Nan. It's just one of those things that isn't done."

"But no one would know it!"

"You would know it—and I would."

"Oh, it's a terrible thing—to deliberately fight, like that! It's like animals—like wolves! Please—for my sake, don't do it."

The man's face went suddenly serious. "It's for your sake I *must* do it, Nan—for your sake and my own."

The story told by the man, Britton, flashed suddenly into the girl's brain. "Have you always done what you think is the right thing?" she asked, in a voice that sounded, somehow, hard and tense. "Haven't you ever run away?"

The girl thought a deeper shadow clouded the man's face as he answered. "That is neither here nor there, Nan," he said, gravely. "It's what we

do now, and continue to do, that counts—not what we have done. I'll see you later."

She watched with clenched fists as he swung across the clearing. He paused for a moment to remove his pack sack and heavy coat, and when he disappeared into the barroom she ran for the door as fast as her feet would carry her.

Inside the room men were playing cards, while others stood about in little groups. Ranged before the bar, four or five men listened as Louis Zang recounted how Trevis had slipped up and hit him when he wasn't looking.

A shadow darkened the open doorway, and a sudden, tense hush pervaded the room. A chair rasped harshly at a card table, and there was a scraping, scuffling sound as men drew back against the wall and stared as though fascinated at the man who stood framed in the doorway. Only a moment he stood so, pack sack and blanket coat dangling from an arm. Then the coat hit the floor with a dull, heavy thud, and the man was advancing swiftly across the floor. Directly behind Louis Zang he paused. A hand reached swiftly and grasped a huge shoulder and Louis Zang spun around on his heels. The next instant a flat-hand slap that carried to the farthest reaches of the room resounded from

Zang's cheek, and the newcomer stepped back a pace, facing him. "I hear you're looking for me, Zang—is that right?"

For a long moment one might have heard the drop of the proverbial pin; then little sounds made themselves felt, rather than heard—the quick breathing of men and the soft shuffle of shifting feet. Someone returned a glass to the bar, and those near him jumped. Then Zang found his voice: "Who—who in hell are you?"

"Trevis—Brad Trevis, is the name."

Zang slowly drew the back of a huge hand across his lips. "Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . . you're Trevis." The baby blue eyes seemed to flicker uncertainly.

Someone laughed, nervously. Then others. Suddenly a perfect bedlam of boos and catcalls filled the room, mingled with taunts and obscene jibes: "When we goin' to begin choppin' him out of the wall, Zang?"—"When you goin' to h'ist him so high he'll bust the floor when he lights?"—"When you goin' to send him ki-yiin' back to the Yukon with his tail between his legs?"

Someone shoved Zang, roughly, and another kicked him from behind. He seemed to rouse suddenly as from a stupor. With a roar like the bel-

low of a bull he hurled himself, arms widely outstretched, straight at Trevis, who hooked in a couple of stiff, short arm jabs and slipped beneath the flailing left arm. Zang faced about and charged again, striving to gather his adversary into his arms—and again Trevis landed short powerful blows and slipped aside, and Zang brought up heavily against the bar.

Trevis was smiling as Zang once more faced him. "I heard what you were telling them there at the bar. I'm not hitting you when you're not looking now, Zang. But we haven't come to that yet. I hear you break dogs' backs against trees——"

Again Zang lunged, this time swinging terrifically with both fists. Trevis sidestepped and landed twice to the face, and when Zang again faced him blood was trickling from his nose and oozing from the corner of an eye. Trevis was talking again—smiling and talking: "Save your wind, Zang. You're not through, yet. I'm not going to knock you out for a long time, Zang—you've got it coming—and I'm going to trim you to suit me. This time it will be the other eye, Zang—and again on the nose." Instead of waiting for Zang to charge, Trevis sprang in, delivered the two blows, and stepped back with

almost incredible swiftness. Zang shook his head and spat blood from his mouth. Again Trevis sprang in and out, and two more blows landed to the face—not long swings that jarred and rocked—but short jabs and hooks that landed with a twist—blows that hurt. “That will close your eyes, Zang—and your nose already has a list to port. I’m going to begin to hit pretty soon, Zang. You’ll have to hurry if you’re going to make them chop me out of the wall.”

Then it was that Zang made a move, swift as it was unexpected. Stooping he picked up a chair and hurled it with all the force of his mighty arms. In the doorway Nan Cushing screamed thinly as the missile caught Trevis squarely on the chest and sent him crashing backward against the bar. In a second Zang was upon him, his arms closing in a death grip about the half-stunned man. Pandemonium broke loose in the room. Yells and curses and distinguishable words: “Kill the big——!”—“Let ’em alone!”—“Everything goes!” And the sound of blows and scuffling as men leaped toward Zang and others leaped in to prevent them.

When the huge arms clamped down, Brad Trevis felt the very breath being squeezed from his body. He made a mighty effort to wriggle free,

but one arm was pinioned, and the last atom of strength seemed to have fled from the other. His brain cleared, and suddenly he went limp and flaccid as a dead eel, his head rolling grotesquely against Zang's barrel chest.

Kicking the chair across the room, Zang thrashed the limp body away from the bar. For a moment he stood glaring through bloodshot and half-closed eyes upon the men, crowded back, now, among the card tables. His swollen and bleeding lips writhed into the semblance of a grin, and his words bellowed huskily: "I'm Louis Zang! Goddam you all! I'll show you how to bust him through the floor!"

Shifting his grip, Zang allowed the limp form to slump a moment at his feet; then, stooping he grasped the shirt-front in one huge hand, and a leg in the other, and raised it high—higher. Men turned away from the sight. Others watched, fascinated. But only a few of those who watched saw what actually happened—saw the limp body, at just the right instant, go taut as a steel spring—saw a fist start almost from the floor and land with terrific impact squarely on the point of Louis Zang's chin. All heard the sound of the blow—and all felt the jar as the huge body crashed backward and measured its length on the floor.

Trevis turned toward the doorway in time to see Nan Cushing vanish into thin air. Stooping, he recovered his blanket coat and walked to the bar.

"Gawd," cried someone, hoarsely, "he lit on his feet, like a cat!" Then pandemonium once more broke loose. Men were crowding about Brad Trevis, shaking his hand, jostling and shoving to stand next to him at the bar, talking all at once.

Old Cush greeted him across the bar: "Hello, Brad," he said. "This time you done it more thorough. This un's on the house."

Trevis grinned. "He had it coming," he said. "Drink up, boys, and have one on me."

When Trevis paid for the round from a pouch stuffed heavy with dust, glances passed from man to man. But, later, when he shoved six similar pouches across to Cushing with the request to stick them in the safe, the room fairly hummed with their whispering and muttering. Here was a man who, thirty days before, had gone into the hills broke, except for the supplies in his pack sack! What's the answer? A strike! A strike sure as hell! A strike almost like Bonanza and Eldorado!

Chapter VII
IN THE CLEARING

Two hours later, except for Doc Milroy and a few wood choppers who were too broke to go stampeding, and Louis Zang, who sat beside a card table with his head buried in his arms, Cushing's Fort was deserted.

"They'll shore churn up the country around Little Caribou," opined Cush. "If you didn't want no neighbors, you shouldn't of showed them sacks."

"Let 'em," grinned Trevis, enigmatically. "If they work hard they'll sluice out a little better than wages. I've made a real strike, Cush—but it's not on Little Caribou."

Later, Trevis found Nan Cushing where he hoped he would find her—in the little clearing where she had stopped that day and watched his clumsy efforts at wood chopping. The girl had been there for hours—ever since the fight. She wondered whether Trevis would come. She was glad, now that it was over, that he had gone

on in and fought Louis Zang. She knew the man code. She knew he could have done nothing else. She knew something else, too—something that shocked her even more than it surprised—she knew that she loved Brad Trevis. She had admitted to herself that she liked him—he had been almost constantly in her thoughts—but she had stoutly denied to herself that she loved him. Then the realization had come upon her with the force of a blow—when she saw Louis Zang hurl the chair that crumpled him against the bar. He *was* different from the others—different from any man she had ever known—different and infinitely superior. And yet—there was Britton, and the vile story he had brought back from the Yukon. It was a lie. It couldn't be true. Not he—not Brad Trevis. And yet—when she had asked him, there in the edge of the spruce a few hours ago, if he had always done what he considered the right thing—if he had never run away—he had evaded an answer. It *couldn't* be true—and yet she knew the story hurt. She had almost given up thought of his coming to her, when she looked up and saw him swiftly crossing the clearing.

She assumed a lighter mood. "Going back to your old job?" she asked.

Trevis smiled. "Never again! Nan, I'll never

have to chop wood any more. I've made a strike!"

"A strike!" cried the girl. "You mean a real strike!"

"Yes, a real strike. I banked nearly seven hundred ounces with your father."

"Do they know it?" cried the girl, leaping to her feet from the woodpile upon which she had been seated. "The men in there?"

Trevis laughed. "There are no men in there, now—except your father and Milroy and Zang. They've all gone—all seemed to have important and urgent business elsewhere as soon as they saw those seven little sacks of gold."

"But," cried the girl, her eyes blazing excitement, "*you haven't filed!* They all know your shack is on Little Caribou! They'll swarm in there and stake the whole creek—your claim and all—and they'll beat you to the recorder!"

"Fine!" grinned Trevis. "I've always wanted to be the daddy of a stampede—even if it is a fake one."

"Fake one! What do you mean—fake?"

"I mean that while it's true my shack is on Little Caribou, my strike is miles and miles away from there. And it's where no one would ever suspect it of being. I punched a few holes up and

down Little Caribou, but it's too much like wood chopping—plenty of work and low pay. 'Gold is where you find it,' they say. Carmack made his big strike by accident at the roots of a birch tree in a wide, flat valley that no one who knew anything about gold would have bothered with. So I passed up the gulches and the steep-banked creeks and pushed farther on and prospected old beaver meadows and moose pastures. And then I struck it—rich right in the grass roots! On the bank of a slow-flowing creek in the middle of a wide willow flat. I learned something down on the Yukon."

At mention of the Yukon, the story of Britton once more flashed into the girl's brain—and once more she thrust it aside. "But you haven't filed," she said.

"No. I haven't filed. To file now would be to give my location away. I am not going to file until you and your father have got your stakes planted right next to mine—above and below discovery. I've prospected both those claims—yellow right in the grass roots. Then we'll all file together."

The girl raised her eyes to his, and Trevis noticed a pucker of tiny wrinkles between the brows. "But—why are you letting us in? Surely,

you must have other friends—older friends—” and then, as an afterthought—“down on the Yukon.”

Trevis smiled. “My friends on the Yukon have all got good claims. I’m letting your father in because I like him—because when I was broke he paid me an ounce a day for a half an ounce of work. I’m no wood chopper. Any one of the others cut twice as much in a day as I did. I did the best I could at it. He knew that—but it didn’t add much to his woodpile. That’s why I’m letting him in—that, and because he lives up here among a bunch of crooks and outlaws and plays the game square.” He paused only for a moment and hurried on: “And you, Nan—I want your stakes in beside mine—because—oh, there’s no use beating about the bush, and I know nothing of pretty speeches—because I love you! I’ve loved you from the first moment I ever saw you—standing there in the doorway, laughing at Louis Zang. And I’ve loved you every moment since. I want you with me always. I wanted to tell you this before—but I couldn’t—when I knew your father was wealthy—and I was an ounce-a-day man. From the first moment I saw you I knew I’d make my strike—*I had to make it!*” He stepped impulsively forward and his arm slipped

gently about her waist. But she eluded the embrace, and stepping swiftly backward stood facing him there in the clearing.

She stood there, wide-eyed, staring into his face. The fingers that clutched the bosom of her flannel shirt felt the thumping of her heart. Her brain raced wildly. Except for Indian squaws, her world had been a world of men. She knew men as few women ever know them. And her heart told her that this man was different. She loved him—and her heart was singing with joy of it. His words rang true—and just to look into his eyes was to know that the story of the foul-mouthed Britton was a damnable lie! Why, even to mention the story to a man like Trevis would be to insult him! And yet—deep down in her heart she knew that unless she did speak, always she would wonder—and with the passing of the days the wonder might grow into doubt—and in their lives there could be no wonderings, no doubts. The breath passed in and out between her parted lips in faintly audible hisses. A voice seemed whispering in her ears: “Wait—take him as he is—ask him some other time.” But she dashed the thought aside. She knew she must speak now—or she would never speak. He would deny it, would brand it as a lie, and she

would believe him. She wanted to believe him—wanted to hear the story given the lie from his own lips. Then all would be well. With a mighty effort she summoned words and her voice sounded hard and strange to her own ears:

“There was a man up from the Yukon. They were in the saloon—Louis Zang was boasting of what he would do to you, and I stayed by the door and listened. Then this other man mentioned your name—he said: ‘So this is where Brad Trevis skipped to?’ And then the others all wanted to know what he knew about you, and he told them that—down there on the Yukon—in Dawson, I think—a man left his wife in their cabin, and when he returned later in the night another man leaped through the window. And that the husband armed himself and went hunting for—for—you. And that you went to the Antlers Saloon and had a talk with some of your friends and they evidently wouldn’t uphold you—and you hurried away and bet your claim against a quarter of a million on the turn of a card, and lost—and then fled away in the darkness and haven’t been seen on the Yukon since.” The words had flowed, faster and faster, in a perfect torrent from her lips, and at the end she paused, panting—staring wide-eyed into his face which

seemed to grow graver and graver with each word. The light had died from his eyes, and he looked ten years older as he stood facing her with the shadows of the spruce trees reaching farther and farther across the clearing. There was pain in those eyes—pain inflicted by her own words. She hastened to reassure him: "I didn't believe a word of it! I knew it was a dirty lie! I wanted to hear you——" She halted abruptly, and a terrible, chilling numbness seemed to grip her very heart. He had raised a hand to interrupt her.

"The facts," he said, in a voice that sounded strained, and tense, and far away, "are very much as you have stated them."

For one terrible moment the girl stood while her dream-world crashed about her ears. Then, with a low, half-articulate cry, she turned and dashed into the timber, leaving the man standing alone in the shadows.

Chapter VIII

MURDER

WHEN Brad Trevis retraced his steps, it was to find Cushing in the barroom alone. Noting the other's glance, the older man explained: "Doc, he's down along the river tryin' to snag him a fish fer supper, an' Zang hit the trail—ain't be'n gone only 'bout fifteen, twenty minutes. You've got to keep yer eye on that gazebo all the more, now, Brad."

"Oh, I guess he won't want any more of my meat—after what happened to-day."

"No, he won't. He won't never tackle you face to face agin. He won't never tackle no man. You busted him, Brad—busted him fer good an' all. An' he knows it. He was the big bucko around here fer quite a spell, an' 'long as he done his stuff an' kep' 'em all bluffed he wasn't so bad. But now it's different. He ain't got no one bluffed no more. You ruint him—plumb an' complete. He's a lone wolf from now on. An' when his kind has got to herd alone—broodin', like he'll brood

—hell's goin' to pop, an' don't you fergit it. If he'd go off somewheres an' mix with folks where no one know'd him—but he won't. He's got too damn good a claim to go off an' leave it. He'll stay. An' he'll lay fer to git you—if it's the last damn thing he does. An' he won't do it open. He's a snake in the grass, he is."

"I suppose he's trailed down after the others to Caribou Creek," opined Trevis, indifferently.

"No, he ain't. He's prob'ly hit straight back fer his own shack to hole up till his face gits well. He'll keep away from folks. He's put his last man on his back. He's bellered his last beller about bein' Louis Zang. If he tried it agin, they'd jest laff."

"Let's get my supplies together and I'll be pulling my freight," said Trevis.

"You won't be pullin' till mornin'?" asked Cushing in surprise.

"I'll pull to-night," answered Trevis, and without a word Old Cush led the way to the trading room. When his pack sack was filled to overflowing, he turned to the older man. "Take it out of the dust in the safe, Cush. I've got a big thing out there in the hills, and you and Nan are in on it. I want you to come on out with me and stake in next to discovery."

"What the hell?"

"Only that I like you, and you've been damned decent to me—that's all. The only other friends I've got are busy with good claims down on the Yukon."

"Have you seen Nan?"

Old Cush had noted that the other seemed unwontedly grave. Out of the tail of his eye, he saw his face grow even more somber at the question.

"Yes," answered Trevis, "I have seen her. I hardly think she will go."

Old Cush ignored the other's mien. "Well, now, mebbe she's right. She's smart, Nan is. An' mebbe she figgers jest like I do. I'm shore obliged to you, Brad, fer lettin' us in. But to go along of you now ain't so good. It ain't goin' to take them hombres long to git to Little Caribou, at the rate they hit out. An' when they git there it won't take 'em no while at all to see that you never took no such amount of dust off'n that crick. Then they'll come hittin' back, an' they'll try their damndest to trail you to where you did git it. Two or three is easier to trail than one. Your idee of hittin' back to-night ain't so bad. It'll give you the jump on 'em. But watch yer trail. It's dry enough now so's you'd ort to fool 'em. Then, later, you can slip in when

they ain't so many around, an' we'll go on out."

"How about Milroy? Are you sure he isn't waiting out to trail me?"

"Hell, Doc couldn't trail nothin'—but aces an' kings an' ten-spots! He couldn't trail a snow-plow across the Yukon flats, if the hangman had ahold of his coat tails. You don't need to worry about him—but they's plenty others that kin."

Trevis swung his pack to his shoulders and turned in the doorway. "So long, Cush," he said. "I'll be back."

"So long, son. Watch yer step. You've got the hull damn country on yer heels by now." From the doorway the older man watched the deep shadows swallow up the figure of Trevis at the edge of the spruce timber. "Now I jest wonder what the hell," he mused, half-aloud. "I'll bet Doc Milroy's gone an' peddled that yarn of Britton's. Women's got about half damn fool in 'em, anyway. She might of know'd it's a lie. Feller like Brad would never skipped out 'cause one man was gunnin' fer him. Hell—he'd stuck around an' shot it out with forty husband's!"

Ten days later Louis Zang again appeared at the fort for supplies that he had been unable to pack out at the time of his previous visit. Old

Cush and Doc Milroy were alone in the barroom when he slunk to the bar and ordered a drink.

"Have one on me, Zang," said Milroy, edging toward the man. "How's things in the hills?"

Zang looked grateful for the words. "I ain't be'n out around none," he said. "I be'n down to my shack."

"Hear about Trevis's strike?" asked Milroy. "You were kind of dead to the world when he banked his dust with Cush."

Zang nodded, morosely. "Oh, I come to in time to hear aplenty." A slow flush of resentment colored the man's cheeks as he growled. "He sure licked me plenty. I ain't forgot that—an' neither I ain't forgot that you was bettin' agin me. Cush, too."

Milroy laughed. "Hell's fire, man! You don't hold that against me, do you? I told you before the fight that Trevis was the best man. Betting's a business proposition with me. I bet to win."

Cushing offered no comment upon his own bet, and Milroy continued: "Trevis is a slick article, all right. He's got his shack over on Little Caribou. But he isn't digging his gold there—by a damn sight. The boys stampeded for Little Caribou when they saw him shove Cush those sacks of dust. Then, by ones and twos and threes

they come trickling back. They panned Trevis's prospect holes, and they scooped out holes of their own the whole length of the creek, and clear down onto Big Caribou. And they found just what they could have found on almost any other creek in the country—wages."

"I could of told 'em that," said Zang, sullenly. "I prospected the Caribous long ago—'fore I druv in my stakes on Owl Crick."

"Where in hell is he getting it, then?"

Zang shrugged. "Any one trail him?"

"No. He's too wise for that. He hit the trail before any of the boys got back from Caribou. Some of 'em tried to pick up his trail. But they come back."

A man paused for a moment in the doorway and crossed swiftly to the bar.

"Hello, Keller," greeted Milroy. "You look like you'd come in a hurry."

"I hev come in a hurry—clean from Humm-o-pooch Crick sence yesterday noon. Scotty Mc-Tague's be'n murdered!"

"Murdered!" cried Doc Milroy.

Old Cush set out a bottle in silence. And Louis Zang gulped down his liquor and refilled his glass from the bottle.

"Yup—murdered, an' nothin' else," affirmed

Keller, as he accounted for two glasses of whiskey with scarcely an interval between. "I hit Scotty's yesterday noon, figgerin' mebbe he'd come on in with me, er I could fetch him out somethin'. He wasn't nowhere's in sight, an' I yelled, an' then I shoved his door open, an' there he laid on the floor—dead."

"That ain't no sign he was murdered," suggested Zang.

"The hell an' it ain't!" cried Keller. "An' him tied hand an' foot with babiche, an' a gill net wound round him on top of that! An' his head stove in, an' the ax it was done with layin' there beside him on the floor with blood an' brains dried onto it. An' his feet an' face burnt in streaks to a blister where whoever done it prob'ly tortured him to make him tell where his dust was cached."

"W-h-e-e-u," whistled Doc Milroy softly. "And he must have had plenty of dust! He's been working that claim for years, and it's the best claim in the country—unless, maybe, Zang's. And no one ever saw him spend an ounce, did they, Cush?"

"He lived pretty much off'n the country," admitted Cushing. "Cat'ridges, an' net twine, an' a little sugar, an' tea, an' flour, an' what clothes

he needed was about all he bought. He could live a year on what most men would use in a month."

"Grouchy old devil. Wonder what the hell he was hidin' out fer?" speculated Keller, refilling his glass, and eying Cush expectantly. "Don't make no difference, now."

"I couldn't say," answered Old Cush.

"Wonder if whoever done it found his cache?" said Zang.

"If they didn't, it ain't because they didn't try," answered Keller. "Things is messed up considerable. Even the dirt is throw'd off the roof poles. He was a tough old bird—I bet he never told 'em."

Doc Milroy frowned. "We'll have the damned police up here nosing around for a month or so, now, I suppose. The three of us better go down and do a little investigating ahead of 'em."

"Not me!" exclaimed Keller, with a shudder. "Onct is enough. I got me an eyeful the first time. I ain't what you might say delycate. But seein' Scotty layin' there with only half his forehead, an' all burnt like he is—it kind of got my goat. I be'n layin' one in front of the other as fast as I could ever sence."

"Hell," jeered Milroy. "A dead man can't hurt you!"

"Mebbe not," admitted Keller. "But they kin make you feel damn funny—when they're dead like that."

"Well then, Zang, you and I will go down. You know the way, don't you?"

Zang exhibited no enthusiasm. "I know the way, all right," he admitted, "but——"

"But hell!" interrupted Milroy. "You throw what you need in your pack, and I'll be ready in a few minutes. You don't want the police nosing around here any more than I do—an' there's a whole lot of others that feel the same way. I've got a hunch that maybe we can head 'em off somehow or other."

Chapter IX
THE PLANT

Two days later Milroy and Zang paused before Scotty McTague's shack on Humm-o-pooch. Doc Milroy was soft, and the two had not "laid one in front of the other" as fast as had Keller on his trip to Cushing's Fort.

Zang slipped the pack from his shoulders and indicated the door with a jerk of the thumb. "Here we be," he said. "Go on if you want to. I done the packin'."

Milroy shoved open the door and instantly recoiled. The weather had been warm and the stench from the interior was unbearable. "W-h-e-e-u! We've got to let it air out awhile! It would kill a man to go in there now."

"What we goin' to do, now we got here?" asked Zang, as the two seated themselves on a rude sluice box.

"Well, in the first place, we'd better hunt around a bit for McTague's cache. We've got no way of knowing whether the man that killed him found his dust or not."

"Ain't we?" asked Zang, leering at the other across his pipe bowl.

"What do you mean?" asked Milroy, frowning. "Keller said he didn't believe McTague told where his cache was. He said there had evidently been a search made. But that don't mean that the search was successful."

"Don't it?"

"What the hell you driving at?" asked Milroy, striving to fathom the other's mind. "That Keller might have killed him and then reported it to throw off suspicion?"

Zang spat with disgust. "Keller! Hell, he ain't got the guts to kill no one—let alone to touch 'em up a little, first! An' besides, it wasn't *him* you seen shovin' Old Cush no dust to bank in his safe, was it?"

Doc Milroy stared at the other, aghast. "Good God!" he exclaimed huskily. "You mean—Trevis? Then McTague's cache was found, after all!"

Zang caught the note of disappointment in the gambler's voice and shrugged. "Well, a man can't bank what he don't find," he said, laconically.

For long moments Doc Milroy smoked in silence as his brain functioned with startling

clarity. Ever since Brad Trevis had appeared at Cushing's Fort—ever since he had stood at the bar and seen Trevis and Nan Cushing gazing into each other's eyes at the moment of their first meeting—he had felt Old Cush's wealth slipping farther and farther from his grasp. He almost smiled at the recollection that he had once considered the swashbuckling Zang as a serious rival. Ever since the incident of the dog he had known that the contempt of the girl for the bully was real and enduring. But Brad Travis was different. She had refused to believe—or pretended she refused to believe—the story Britton brought up from the Yukon. It wasn't so much, anyway. A woman could forgive a thing like that—even if she did believe. But murder! Cold-blooded murder and torture for robbery—that she would never forgive. But even if she did, the police could step in and render her forgiveness of no avail in so far as Brad Trevis was concerned. That's it—the police! They'd come nosing around as soon as they heard of the murder. And if they found an open-and-shut case, they'd turn around and go back to the Yukon—and take Brad Trevis with them.

"I believe you're right, Zang," he said, finally. "I thought it was damned funny that a stranger

could come in here and in one month make a bigger strike than any of you fellows who have put in years in the country. It didn't look reasonable. But hell—there was the dust!"

"Uh-huh," said Zang. "An' it looks like here's where he got it."

"But—he only banked about seven hundred ounces—and Scotty McTague must have had half a ton."

"He wouldn't be damn fool enough to bank it all to onct—even if he could of packed it in. He'll lay low in the hills makin' 'em think he's made him a strike somewheres, an' every onct in so often he'll show up with a few sacks of dust, like he was takin' it out of his claim."

"Do you suppose he's packed it away from here—all of it?"

Zang sneered. "You don't s'pose he'd leave it layin' around, do you? Sure as hell he's packed it off—packed it off an' cached it where it ain't no use to go huntin' fer it—less'n someone was to stick right to his tail till they seen him go to the cache. An' that would be one hell of a chore."

"Damn him!" cried Milroy. "He'll pay for this job with his neck! There isn't a man in this country that wants the police nosing around in these hills, and we've all been careful not to pull

off anything that would bring them in. And now this damned pup comes along and pulls a murder and robbery!"

"We might bury Scotty, or burn the shack with him in it, an' the police wouldn't know nothin' about it," suggested Zang.

"Hell! Keller knows—and probably a dozen others, by this time. It'll get to the police, all right. What's to prevent Trevis himself slipping down and tipping the crime off to them, and then beating it out of the country? He's got McTague's gold."

"We might slip over an' lay fer Trevis an' give him a dost of his own medicine, an' then knock him off, an' split up Scotty's gold."

"And have the police nosing around after two murders instead of one," sneered Milroy. "Let's go in now and look around a bit, and then maybe we can think of some scheme."

Reluctantly Zang followed Milroy into the windowless, one-roomed shack where, by the light from the doorway, they could see the bloated and mutilated body wrapped in round after round of gill netting. The odor was still almost unbearable, and the two paused just within the door, standing one side and the other to allow the admission of light.

"There's the ax, jest like Keller told," said Zang, stooping to reach for the weapon.

"Don't touch it! You damned fool!" cried Milroy, so sharply that the other drew back. "Don't you know that there may be fingerprints on that handle that would cinch the case against Trevis? Don't touch one damned thing in this room. There's what he burnt him with—that rifle—see where the end has been stuck in the stove and heated. There may be fingerprints on that, too. And in fact, most anything—he seems to have handled about everything in the room before he got through."

"What d'you mean—fingerprints?" asked Zang, surlily.

"Why—fingerprints—the marks of your fingers, of course. Didn't you know that if your fingers happen to be a little sweaty, or there's any blood, or even clay, or ashes or soot, on them, and you touch any hard surface like metal, or glass, or polished wood, they'll leave marks that the police can photograph and tell just who made them?"

"How in hell kin they tell who made 'em?" asked Zang, skeptically.

"Well, for instance, they photograph any fingerprints they find on that ax handle, or that

gun barrel, and then they arrest Trevis and take his prints, and if they tally with those photos they've got him dead to rights."

"How would they know they mightn't be yourn, or mine?"

"There have been millions of fingerprints taken during the last couple of thousand years or so—and they've never found two alike yet. Once they get the prints on a man, he's a goner."

"Hell-damn!" cried Zang, so sharply that Milroy regarded him in surprise. "Who told you that?"

"Why, it's a matter of common knowledge, you damned fool! Where have you been all your life?"

Zang was scowlingly examining his fingers. "Hell," he said, "one man's hands is the same as another's, only, mebbe, bigger. You got hands like a woman—but Trevis, now—his hands is as big as mine."

Milroy shrugged. "All right, bucko—have it your own way. I don't claim to know everything. But if I were you I'd keep my hands in my pockets around this shack, that's all."

"What in hell did we come down here fer, if we ain't goin' to do nothin' now we're here?" growled Zang.

"One reason was because I thought maybe there was a chance that whoever murdered McTague had failed to find his cache, and that we might be able to locate it. Since we know that Trevis did find it, the thing to do is to hand the police an open-and-shut case so they won't be hanging around here for God knows how long figuring it out for themselves. And I've got the scheme that will do just that little thing."

Stepping gingerly past the corpse, Milroy slipped his fingers into the pocket of a grease-glazed buckskin vest that hung from a stub that protruded from the pole stanchion at the head of the old prospector's bunk, and withdrew a huge silver watch. It was but the work of a moment to unfix the thong from the buttonhole, and with the watch in his hand he stepped swiftly from the fetid interior of the shack and breathed deeply of the clean, spruce-laden air of the hills.

"You can shut the door, now," he said to Zang. "We're through in there."

"Yer a damn fool fer pinchin' off that watch," opined Zang, as the two once more seated themselves on the sluice box. "Everyone in the country knows it's Scotty's—the boys are always kiddin' him about it—his ten-pound turnip, they

call it. Whoever knocked Scotty off—Trevis—he was too smart to lift it—you bet.”

Milroy ignored the protest. “Can we get from here to Little Caribou—to Trevis’s shack—without going back to the fort?” he asked.

“Sure, we kin. But what you want to go to Trevis’s shack fer?”

“For the same two reasons we came down here—we may find McTague’s gold; and we want to hand the police an open-and-shut case.”

“He wouldn’t pack Scotty’s gold to his shack,” said Zang.

“Maybe not. But we’ll pack this watch there. We’ll cache it in the shack where he won’t be apt to find it—but where the police will when they make a thorough search. Then, to make the case plumb ironclad, we’ll pick up something of Trevis’s and bring it back here and lose it where I can accidentally kick it up, when we come back with the police. That, and the watch, and the fact that Trevis suddenly banked better than ten thousand dollars in dust when everyone knows he was broke when he went into the hills, and his claim isn’t paying out any better than wages—that will fix it so the dumbest rookie they’ve got on the force couldn’t help but take him in. I wouldn’t frame a murder on any man

if I didn't know he was guilty. But this is a damned dirty murder, and he's got it coming."

"Sure, he has," assented Zang,¹ eagerly. "Le's git goin'. It's better'n thirty mile to Little Caribou—an' you ain't so good on the trail."

The shadows were long the next evening when the two halted at the edge of the tiny clearing that surrounded Trevis's shack. For an hour they lay in the bush, watching—and then crossed the clearing. Before the door Zang halted abruptly and pointed to a mark on the ground. Glancing over his shoulder, his eyes swept the rim of the clearing, then dropping to his knees, he bent low over the mark. "He's be'n here to-day," he announced, nervously. "That's his track. See them hobs? I know the pattern. I got a good look at 'em when I lifted him up—back there to Cushing's."

Milroy's glance, too, swept the edges of the clearing. "Well," he said, "he isn't here now. Let's go in." Pushing open the door, he hesitated a moment on the threshold and stepped into the untenanted shack, closely followed by Zang, whose eyes continued to sweep the clearing with quick, nervous glances.

Milroy advanced, sniffed at the stove, and pointed to a splotch of white on the floor beside the rude table. "He's been here to-day, all right," he agreed. "The stove's hardly cold yet—and there's a gob of flour the mice haven't tracked up yet."

"What the hell was he doin' here?" speculated Zang. "He ain't workin' this claim."

Milroy shrugged. "Well, it's his shack. Maybe he packed in a load of McTague's dust and cached it. Maybe he used it as a sort of base to operate from." He paused abruptly, his gaze centered upon the wall just above a rough bench upon which rested a tin wash basin. "A-ha!" he exclaimed and, stepping to the bench, removed an object that had been slipped over a nail driven into the wall. "His seal ring! I remember seeing it on his finger. He probably took it off to wash and forgot it." Slipping the ring into his pocket, he grinned. "I guess the rope's already braided, Mr. Trevis, that is going to tighten around your neck."

"Cache the watch, an' le's git a-goin'," said Zang. "He might come back."

"I don't think he'll be back to-night," said Milroy. "I was thinking we might enjoy the comfort of his bunk. There's a stove here, too—

and we can keep away from the damned mosquitoes."

"Not by a damn sight!" cried Zang. "I'd almost ruther stay down to Scotty's than here. You plant that turnip, an' we'll git to hell out of here!"

"I'm not going to leave without a hunt for that cache. I've got a hunch he's packed McTague's gold over here and cached it someplace."

"I ain't got no sich a hunch!" exclaimed Zang, emphatically. "An' if I had I wouldn't stay in this shack. What if he'd come back an' find us here? If yer hell-bent on huntin' fer his cache, we'll haul out into the brush a mile or so, an' camp till mornin'. Then we kin slip back, an' if he ain't showed up we kin hunt fer the cache in the daylight."

"We'd be more comfortable camping in here than out in the brush," objected Milroy.

"By God, you'll camp alone, then! An' what's more, I'll light out fer my own shack—an' where'll you be? You couldn't find yer way back to Cush's to save yer soul from hell."

"All right, have it your way," surrendered Milroy, and crossing to the bunk, slipped McTague's huge silver watch deep beneath the thick mattress of dry sedges covered by a single

blanket. Cutting a spruce bough, Zang carefully brushed the loose earth before the door, effectively obliterating their tracks. Then, leaving the shack, they threaded the timber in the slow-gathering darkness, crossed a ridge, and camped beside a tiny creek in a narrow gulch.

Chapter X

BACK AT CUSHING'S

THE following morning Milroy searched industriously for Trevis's cache of McTague's gold. Protesting that he didn't believe Trevis had packed Scotty's gold to Little Caribou, Zang refused to join the search, but consented to act as lookout from the top of a bush-covered pinnacle of rock that jutted from the ridge to give a view up and down the creek. Believing that no such amount of dust as McTague was supposed to have could be concealed in the cabin, Milroy put in the time exploring rock crevices and scooping the top gravel out of the numerous prospect holes with which the stampedeers had pitted the valley. At noon, hot and disgusted, he gave it up, and after a smoke and a meal of tea and pork and cold bannocks, he struck out after Zang on the back trail to McTague's cabin on Humm-o-pooch.

Late the following afternoon they concealed the seal ring beneath a carelessly placed bit of

bark near the sluice box. Zang glanced toward the low-hung sun. "Le's git a-goin'," he suggested. "I don't like it here no better'n what I did at Trevis's. Hangin' around these damn shacks gives me the willies."

Milroy laughed. "I can understand your not wanting to be caught around Trevis's," he bantered. "But McTague's harmless. And I'm tired."

"That's all right, but I wasn't born in no graveyard, an' I ain't never got use' to hangin' around no dead men. They's another crick two-three mile from here. We kin camp there an' git away from this stink."

The two crossed a ridge, threaded a spruce swamp, and came out upon a beautiful little stream of rocky rapids and deep pools. Milroy produced hook and line from his pocket, cut a willow, and with a borer grub for bait jerked from the pool half a dozen trout which Zang fried to a golden brown.

"Now all we've got to do," said the gambler, when the meal was over and the two were seated close against the smudge, "is to slip up to the fort and tell Cush what we've discovered, and——"

"Tell Cush! What in hell d'you want to tell

Cush fer? He'll prob'ly tip Trevis off. Er the gal will." Milroy noted the smoldering red in the other's eyes as he continued. "Looks like she's kind of throw'd in with Trevis. But with him out of the road, I'll show her! She's laughed at me one time too many."

Milroy frowned. "You don't know Cush like I do," he said. "He don't want the police hangin' around this country any more than you or I do."

"Is Cush hidin' out, too?"

"Hell, no! But, barring the Siwashes, all his customers are. Cush makes more profit out of his saloon than he does out of his trading room—and he never sells liquor to a Siwash. Figure out for yourself where his profits would go if all the white men beat it out of this country ahead of the police. Anything that we can do to shorten the stay of the police around these diggings will be all to the good with Cush."

"But how about the gal?"

"She won't know. Cush never talks."

Zang scowled into the smoke. "Cush, he's kind of on the level. He mightn't stand fer framin' a murder onto Trevis."

"You let me do the talking," said Milroy. "And after we've put Cush wise, you and I will hit down to the Yukon and report the crime to

the police, and they'll detail a man to come on back with us."

"Down to the Yukon! Me! To the police!" cried Zang. "You're crazy as hell! I'm jest as clost to the Yukon—an' a damn sight closter to the police right now than I wisht I was! Hell-damn! If I'd show up on the Yukon they'd stretch my neck so fast it would burn the rope!"

"Ah," grinned Milroy. "Perhaps, then, it would be as well if you stayed here. They've got nothing on me in the Yukon country. My—er—difficulty was in Alaska."

"You go after the police, then—an' I'll trail Trevis, so when you come back the police won't lose no time huntin' him. I'll pick up his trail somewhere an' find out where he hangs out at. I'll watch his shack—we know he comes back there now an' then."

"Good idea," approved Milroy. "Then when I come back you can slip me the word, and the officer can pick him up."

"Looks all right," admitted Zang, doubtfully, "except fer lettin' Cush in on it."

"Listen here—I know that Cush wouldn't stand for framing an innocent man. But Trevis is guilty as hell. You know that, and so do I. Cush will be sore as anyone at the man who came

in here and pulled a crime that would bring the police into the country. Mind—let me do all the talking.”

“I won’t have nothin’ to say,” growled Zang, surlily. “But I’ll be there, an’ if I don’t like the looks of things I’m a-goin’ to pull my freight over acrost the line an’ hole up till the hull damn thing blows over—an’ don’t yer fergit it.”

Cush was alone in the barroom, laboriously thumbing a ledger, when the two entered.

“Hello, Cush!” greeted Milroy. “I thought Nan was the bookkeeper of the concern.”

“Yeah—when she’s here,” answered Cushing, dryly. “But three days ago a couple of Siwashes drifts in with the word that a hull band of Injuns is dyin’ off with some misery or other, on some God-forsaken crick I never even heard of, an’ nothin’ would do but she should grab off all the medicine she could git holt of, an’ most of the grub—an’ hire her five, six packers, an’ hit out. I told her she better keep away from there, but she claimed she’s had the measles, an’ was vaccinated agin smallpox, an’ she was goin’, anyway—so what the hell—you can’t arger with her, onct she’s got her mind made up. You be’n down to Scotty McTague’s?”

The three filled their glasses from the bottle

Old Cush had set out on the bar. "Yes," answered Milroy. "We have. We found him just as Keller said—tied with babiche and wound up in a gill net—head bashed in, and his face and feet burned to blisters with his own rifle barrel heated red hot in the stove. And we found a hell of a lot more, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. We know who killed him."

"H-m-m-m, next thing, I s'pose, you an' Zang'll be jinin' on with the police."

"I'm going to throw in with the police in this case," said Milroy. "It was a damned dirty murder, and the man that did it deserves to swing out at the end of a rope. That's one reason, and another is, of course, the one I gave out before we went down—to help clear up the case and get the police out of the country." Milroy drank, and trickled a little more liquor into his glass. "I'm going to tell you, straight out, Cush, that wasn't the only reason Zang and I went down there. We figured that McTague must have had a hell of a lot of dust cached somewhere, and we went down on the chance that whoever killed him hadn't found it." He paused and Old Cush swallowed his own drink.

"Well," he said, "you ain't told me no news, so far."

"We didn't find the dust," continued Milroy, "for the simple reason that the man that knocked McTague off beat us to it. But, we did find something else—a seal ring, with B. L. T. in monogram on its dark green stone setting—a ring I'd noticed several times on Brad Trevis's fingers!"

Old Cush nodded, slowly. "Yeah," he said. "I've noticed that ring, too."

"Well, when we found that ring, the whole thing was as plain as the nose on a man's face. Everyone knows that Trevis hit out from here broke, and was back in a month and banked better than ten thousand in dust. He claimed he'd made a strike—but the boys soon proved that there isn't a spot on Little Caribou, or any creek around there, that will pay out much better than wages. He banked the gold, all right. And he's got a hell of a lot more to bank—but it's Scotty McTague's gold!"

"Sounds kind of reasonable," admitted Old Cush.

"You bet, it sounds reasonable! But that isn't all. When we found that ring, we hit out for Trevis's shack, thinking that, if he packed the dust up there, we might locate his cache. But he was too slick for us. We hunted around for more than half a day and couldn't find it. But,

hidden under about a foot of rushes on his bunk, we did find McTague's watch! You remember that old silver watch—an inch thick, and weighs about a pound! The boys used to guy him about it."

"Yeah, I remember it well. They used to call it Scotty's stone-crusher. Did you fetch 'em in—the watch an' the ring?"

"Hell no! We left them for evidence. I'm going to hit down the river and bring in the police and let them find that watch and that ring. In the meantime Zang will try to pick up Trevis's trail and locate his hangout so we won't lose any time when we get there. We're telling you this, Cush, because we know damned well that you don't want anyone pulling off any crimes in this country any more than we do. And because we know that you wouldn't stand back of anyone that would torture an old man and then murder him for his gold."

"No," answered Cushing, in a voice that rang harder than was its wont. "No, the man that killed Scotty McTague don't git no aidin' nor abettin' from me."

Chapter XI

ZANG TAKES THE TRAIL

ZANG outfitted for a long trail, and an hour later, with his pack and his rifle, he struck off into the timber.

Milroy bargained with an Indian to take him downriver in a canoe, and while the man was overhauling the frail craft and outfitting her, the gambler talked with Cushing. "I guess this Trevis is a hard-boiled hombre, all right," he said. "A man would have to be to handle Zang the way he did. But I'll be damned if I thought he'd pull a stunt like that McTague murder."

Old Cush wiped thoughtfully at the bar. "You can't never tell," he opined.

"I hope Zang will be able to locate him," said Milroy. "I'm not much of a woodsman, but it seems to me almost a hopeless job to try and locate a man among all those God-forsaken hills and valleys."

"'Cordin' to how much trail he leaves."

"I don't believe he'd leave much. Zang was

trying to pick up his trail all the way from Humm-o-pooch to Little Caribou, but he never found it. We thought maybe we could trail him to the place he had cached McTague's gold."

"'Tain't likely a man would leave much of a trail to a gold cache."

"He didn't, at least. And that's why I'm afraid Zang won't be able to locate his hide-out. I'll tell you, Cush—if Trevis comes in here before I get back, you try to find out where he's holing up. If he won't let anything slip, you might put a Siwash on his trail when he leaves."

"I ain't in the police industry," replied Cushing, dryly. "I don't never help the police; neither I don't never hinder 'em."

"But it would get you in mighty good with 'em if you could tell 'em right where to go to pick up Trevis."

"Yeah—but where would it put me with the rest of the folks around here when they found out I'd tipped someone off to the police?"

"That's just it—it would put you in good, all around! I know there's some pretty rough characters in these hills—but there isn't one of them that would uphold that McTague murder—or any other crime that would bring the police into the country. Anything you could do to get

the police out in a hurry would be all to the good with them."

"Mebbe," admitted Cush. "But git this: It ain't none of my business if one man kills another—jest so it ain't me. I wouldn't be interested."

Milroy pouched some dust for expenses, and passed the time with solitaire until the Indian informed him that the canoe was ready.

Upon leaving Cushing's Fort, Louis Zang struck straight for Little Caribou. Caching his pack in a thicket on the ridge just back of the pinnacle from which he had watched while Milroy searched for McTague's gold, he made his way to the lookout and carefully scanned the valley. The door of Trevis's shack was closed, and no smoke issued from the stovepipe. A quarter of a mile below, a cow moose, followed by a spring calf, splashed in the shallows, crossed the stream, and disappeared in the timber. A flock of ducks winged up the valley, flying low—following the course of the stream. Zang intently watched their flight until they disappeared in the distance. Satisfied, he rose from his cover and, rifle in hand, descended into the valley. The creek was deserted—the ducks had not flared in their flight.

Dropping to his knees before the door of the shack, he examined the ground where he had obliterated the tracks. "No one b'en here sence we was," he muttered. For some moments he hesitated, then, hastily crossing the clearing, he seated himself in a dense thicket to ponder upon whether or not he should enter the shack.

A lone cowboy or a ranger will talk to his horse. In the Northland amid the mighty solitudes of towering mountains, or the drear reaches of boundless flat barrens, lone prospectors talk to their dogs, addressing them as pardner, or pal, or old fellow. Some even talk to their rifles. But Louis Zang hated dogs, and to him his rifle was merely a tool with which to get meat. And so, slow and ponderous of brain, and possessing a boundless egotism, he was wont to hold long arguments in husky half-whispers with himself. It was thus now, as he debated whether or not to enter Brad Trevis's shack. "He must of come here fer somethin'—that day we was here. His tracks was fresh when we come. It wasn't fer grub, 'cause he packed his grub to where he's at. He's made a hell of a strike somewheres, an' the chances is he come back to cache some dust. But if I go in there to hunt fer it without no lookout, an' he come along, he'd knock

the livin' hell out of me agin—or I'd have to shoot him. An' neither one wouldn't be so good. It's like Doc says—we'd have the damn police nosin' around fer two murders instead of one. I'm damn glad I'm pardners with Doc on this. He's smarter'n what I be, in some ways—like cachin' Scotty's watch an' Trevis's ring. I wouldn't of thought that out. An' I got plenty more use fer him, 'fore I've got all I'm goin' to git outa this deal. After that, Doc might disappear some night—but they's plenty time to figger on that. An' plenty time to hunt Trevis's shack fer his dust, after the law takes him down to the Yukon an' stretches his neck fer him. What I got to do is to find out where he's shove-lin' out all that dust. It's couple hundred mile to Dawson, an' the best Doc kin do is about four days down an' ten back to Cush's. Then anyways two days to Scotty's, an' prob'ly a day froggin' around there, an' another day to here—that gives me eighteen, nineteen days besides the time he stops in Dawson. Trevis'll come back here! I'll wait!" He paused and scowlingly regarded his fingers, rubbing their tips speculatively with the end of his thumb. "Wonder if he was kiddin' me about them finger marks? Hell! It stands to reason one man's hands is the same as another's,

barrin' size, or scars, or somethin' like that. An' it don't stand to reason a man could grip nothin' hard enough to leave his finger tracks in it—mud, er putty, mebbe—but nothin' solid, like ax handles an' gun bar'ls." To prove the assertion, the man grasped his rifle barrel and squeezed it in a mighty grip, then minutely examined the steel. As the light struck aslant the barrel he noticed certain slight, roughly parallel lines that his sweaty fingers and palm had left on the metal. "Huh," he grunted. "Doc was kiddin' me. He thinks he's damn smart, Doc does. But he ain't the only smart one. Jest as if I wouldn't know that everyone's hands has got them lines onto 'em! 'Course, anyone could tell if it was my hand, or his'n, which it's little an' soft like a woman's. But this here Trevis—he's got big hands, too. Doc, he damn near put one over on me, though. Fer a while I figgered on slippin' back down to Humm-o-pooch an' burnin' that shack, Scotty an' all. But I'm damn glad I didn't. Chances is, when the sweat dries up them marks will be gone, anyhow—but if they ain't, so much the better. Trevis's hands is as big as mine—an' with what other stuff they'll have on him, it'll cinch the case."

Rising, Zang circled the clearing, studying

the ground, foot by foot, in search of the tracks of Trevis's hobnailed pacs. At the end of an hour he picked up a track headed upstream, and spent the rest of the day trying to work out the trail. Here and there as he worked up the little valley he picked up other tracks, only to lose the trail hopelessly among the ridges at the head of the stream.

Returning, he camped on the ridge in the thicket behind the lookout, and the following day he spent in vain effort to pick up a trail beyond the confines of the valley. Thereafter, with the patience of an Indian, he lay for nine days on the rock pinnacle and alternately dozed and watched the valley, only leaving his post to step back over the crest of the ridge and cook his meals over a smokeless fire of dry willow.

Supper over on the evening of the ninth day, he threw himself down on the pinnacle top, lighted his pipe, and scowlingly regarded the shack. The sun had disappeared at noon behind a heavy blanket of clouds, and a fine, drizzling rain had set in. The shack looked inviting. Zang remembered the foot-thick mattress of dry rushes on the pole bunk. There would be a stove, and a roof over him. Up here his bed would be a flat rock, with a blanket and a slicker and a

tarp for covering. "If he don't git here by dark, he won't be comin' on a night like this," he mumbled. "An' I could git out of there 'fore daylight." For a half-hour he smoked in silent discomfort, shifting the collar of his slicker as little trickles of water crept down his spine. Then suddenly his muscles tensed, and he strained his eyes to peer downward through the mist into the deeper gloom of the valley. A man had stepped into the little clearing and was crossing to the door of the shack. The man was Brad Trevis, and as Zang focused the glass Milroy had loaned him he noted that the man's blanket coat was caught together only at the throat, but that, instead of flapping when he walked, the skirts hung straight down as though heavily weighted. Pushing open the door, Trevis entered the shack and a moment later little blurred bars of dull yellow light showed here and there where the squirrels and the mice had filched the chinking of dry caribou moss for nesting material. "Even beat me out of a dry bed, damn him!" growled Zang, as he wiped the glass and returned it to its case. "But my time's comin'. He's diggin' gold now—but I'll be spendin' gold while he's roastin' in hell. They was gold in that coat—plenty gold—mebbe four, five hundred ounces,

the way it hung. I wonder is he figgerin' to cache the stuff here, or is he goin' on in an' bank it with Cush? By God, I'll know in the mornin'."

After an uncomfortable night of fitful cat naps Zang threw off his tarp, and in the cold gray of early morning laced his pacs. The wind had risen during the night and the fine mist drove against his face and trickled from the end of his chin, and followed down his neck, wetting the collar of his shirt. He essayed a fire, but the wet wood smoked, and the wind whirled the telltale odor into the valley. With a curse he stamped the tiny fire into the ground and bolted a hurried breakfast of cold bannocks. Caching most of his outfit, he made up a light pack, picked up his rifle, and hurried to his outlook post.

For an hour he lay there wondering whether Trevis had left the shack—cursing himself for fooling with the fire. Then smoke curled from the stovepipe and he settled back with a sigh of relief. Another hour he waited, cursing and mumbling in the cold gray drizzle. "His other diggin's can't be more'n a day from here. He wasn't packin' no blankets," he muttered.

The door opened, and Trevis stepped out. Instantly Zang had the glass on him. His eyes gleamed with avarice as he noted that the wind

whipped the skirts of the coat, as Trevis buttoned the garment closely about him.

Pulling the door to, Trevis crossed the clearing and struck up the creek. "Back to his diggin's, by God!" breathed Zang, exultantly. "If he'd be'n headin' fer Cush's he'd of crossed the crick in them shallows!" Catching up rifle and pack, he followed, holding to the crest of the ridge where every now and then, through the scrub, he could catch a glimpse of the man in the valley.

At the head of the creek Trevis topped the ridge upon which Zang lay concealed, crossed a narrow dry wash, and climbed the opposite ridge which he followed toward a high hill that loomed dimly through the mist in the distance.

Zang realized the utter futility of attempting to track the man, the rocky terrain rendering it unnecessary, at least on the ridges, for him to set foot on the rain-softened ground. He was forced, therefore, to keep the man almost constantly in sight, a precarious business even under the favorable conditions of cross-wind and low visibility.

After following the ridge for some five or six miles, Trevis skirted the mountain and struck out onto another ridge that ascended sharply to a range of saw-toothed peaks that blurred into gray distance. As the scrub thinned Zang was

forced to drop farther and farther behind and to seek what scant cover he could find behind rock fragments and stunted, thinly scattered timber. A goodly part of the distance he covered on hands and knees, and to add to his danger, Trevis was wont to stop at irregular intervals and scan the back trail.

The summit was reached at last, and with a heartfelt curse of relief, Zang saw Trevis disappear into a deeply notched rock canyon. Five minutes later he entered the canyon and, proceeding cautiously, negotiated its crooked length and emerged abruptly onto the northern slope of the range. Slipping behind a rock fragment he crouched and swept the landscape with his glass. Unlike the rock-ribbed southern aspect, the terrain here slanted gradually downward in slow-rolling hills to a flat tundra whose farther reaches lost themselves in a blurred gray horizon. His glass picked up Trevis a quarter of a mile down a bald slope. He saw the man stop, survey the back trail, and proceed. He grinned to himself as he noted the tracks in the rain-softened soil. No more precarious dodging. No more creeping from rock to rock on bleeding palms and knees. Trevis could get as far ahead now as he liked—and be damned to him. Tracking would be a

simple matter from here. He could even watch the man clear onto the flat from where he sat.

Removing his heavy pacs, Zang cached them beneath some rocks and drew on a pair of moosehide moccasins. When Trevis showed merely as a speck in the glass, he arose from behind his rock and struck out swiftly on his trail, noting with satisfaction that his own feet left scarcely a mark in the mossy ground. Grass gradually replaced the moss, but Zang had no trouble in following the tracks of Trevis's hobnailed pacs.

On the flat the trail led toward a growth of stunted willows that edged the banks of a mucky, sluggish stream that wound aimlessly across the flat cut with innumerable beaver canals. "Where in hell is he headin' fer?" grumbled Zang as darkness began to gather, and he strained his vision to penetrate the blurred horizon. "He won't never make it acrost this flat to-night ——" The words ended abruptly in a splash, and muttering curses he wallowed out of a beaver wash whose muck gripped him to the middle. Following the wash to the river he saw where Trevis had crossed it by means of a vaulting pole that lay on the bank.

Proceeding more carefully, he had gone perhaps a mile when he became aware that the

character of the terrain had changed. The ground seemed firmer, and there were no more beaver washes. Scrub timber appeared here and there in clumps, back from the river. Zang was ready to camp. He was wet and tired, and he had eaten nothing since morning except the cold bannocks he had munched as he walked. "Trevis is one damn good man on the trail," he muttered, grudgingly. "Me, I'm goin' to camp."

Chapter XII

ON THE FLATS

IT WAS nearly dark when Zang headed for a clump of stunted spruce that loomed indistinct in the near distance. Suddenly he halted and dropped flat on the ground. A dull blur of light showed from that same clump of spruce, and even as he looked he saw Trevis step from the clump, water pail in hand, and head for the river, a hundred yards away. When the other disappeared in the willows, Zang sprang to his feet and ran as fast as his legs would carry him to the opposite end of the spruce patch from which the man had emerged. Wriggling into the thick cover, he raised his head. The light he had seen filtered through the walls of a tiny silk tent, from the stovepipe of which the acrid blue smoke of burning spruce rose to sting his nostrils. He heard Trevis approach. Heard the jangle of the bail as he set down his water pail, and watched for a few moments the grotesquely moving shadow on the tent wall as the man set about cooking his supper.

Cautiously Zang wriggled into the open, and silently he faded into the darkness. A mile down wind in the shelter of another spruce thicket he managed a miserable little blaze. From a near-by stagnant pool he procured water, boiled a pot of tea, and fried a slab of salt pork. Then, wet and dog tired, he rolled in his blanket and tarp and slept.

Zang awoke early in the morning, numb with cold, and wriggled stiffly from his blanket. The sky had cleared, and the rain-laden gale of the day before had tempered into a light northerly breeze. Crawling to the edge of his thicket, the man focused his glass on the copse a mile to the eastward that sheltered Trevis's little green silk tent. Rolling onto his belly he braced his elbows against the ground in a mighty effort to hold the eight-power glass on its objective. But the uncontrollable shivering of his muscles caused the field of copse and plain and mountains to leap and mingle together in wild terpsichorean orgy. Cursing between chattering teeth he crept back to the center of the copse. "By God, I got to take a chanct. I got to have me a fire, er I'll die. If he spots my smoke it'll be him er me—an' he can't git in range without showin' hissself in the open."

With belt-ax and knife he attacked a dead

spruce and soon was hovering close over a crackling and almost smokeless blaze. For a half hour he hugged the fire, and gradually as his body absorbed the grateful heat the shivering ceased. Once again he crawled to the edge of the thicket, and for long minutes he studied Trevis's copse. There was no sign of Trevis, but once and again he caught a faint curl of smoke that thinned into air just above the tops of the stunted trees. He noted with satisfaction that the smoke from his own fire was quickly dispersed by the breeze. "He won't spot me without he's got a powerful glass," he muttered, "onlest these damn moccasins left tracks back there when I hit out in the dark. But what with the ground bein' hard an' the grass tough, I don't figger they did."

Creeping to the pool, he filled his teapot and breakfasted hugely upon pork, bannocks, and tea. He eyed his nether garments in disgust. From the waist down he was coated with the black muck of the beaver wash. The east was vivid with the splendor of the false dawn. Zang doused his fire. "I got all day to dry out," he maundered, "but I don't dast to keep my fire. When the sun hits smoke jest right she shows up fer a hell of a ways."

Leaving the center of the thicket, he en-

sconced himself behind a low bushy spruce that commanded a view of Trevis's location. He could see the man moving about—could distinctly see him stoop, work for a few moments with a shovel, and carry a pan to the river. In a few minutes he would emerge from the fringe of willows, and repeat the performance. "Good God—he ain't even got a sluice!" breathed Zang. "An' no shaft, neither! He's shovelin' her right off'n the top! But who in hell ever heard of diggin' gold in the middle of a flat? By God—he's smart. He prob'ly seen me follerin' him, an' this here's another blind—like his shack on Little Caribou."

The sun rose higher and higher, and under the warmth of its rays mosquitoes rose from the grass and the scrub and swarmed about Zang's head in countless millions. In vain he tried to focus his glass on Trevis. The field was blurred by an impenetrable fog of dancing gray shapes that attacked his face and neck and hands in stinging thousands. There were mosquitoes in the valleys of the mountains—but not mosquitoes like this. Zang cased his glass. The whining, stinging insects filled his eyes, his nostrils, his mouth, and in cursing agony, slapping, brushing at his face, he charged wildly into the thicket

and, wrapping his slicker about his head, lay down and drew his tarp over him. He finally succeeded in ridding his shelter of the insects and lay hot and uncomfortable, while about him the blood-thirsty horde hummed like singing wires.

Toward evening the wind rose, veered to the east, and in a half-hour the humming had ceased and Zang gingerly thrust his face into the open. The chill of the highlands was in the air, and save for a few lazily droning insects there was not a mosquito to be seen. The sun was low, and Zang saw that Trevis was still at his work.

"Wonder how long I've got to lay in this God-forsaken hole," he growled, as he boiled his tea. "By God, if I didn't think this camp was another of Trevis's blinds, I'd pull out to-night. But I got to stick till I find out."

He slept better that night, breakfasted early, and crept to his post behind the stunted spruce. Trevis was nowhere to be seen, but as before, he made out thin wisps of smoke that rose from the copse. A moving object caught his eye, and he trained his glass upon the plain beyond the sluggish river. A band of caribou was feeding—spreading slowly out from the foothills. A dozen—fifty—a hundred—they seemed to be pouring from some defile in the hills to spread fanlike

over the tundra. Zang's mouth watered at the thought of juicy caribou meat. He had been living for a week on salt pork and tea and bannocks—and now the bannocks were gone. There were hundreds of the feeding animals now. He judged they were issuing from the mountains at a point some eight or ten miles north of the pass through which he had followed Trevis.

He lowered the glass and instantly raised it again. Rifle in hand, Trevis was standing at the edge of his thicket staring at the caribou herd, which was feeding some two or three miles beyond. For some time the man stood motionless, then swiftly slipped into the willows that fringed the river. A few minutes later he reappeared on the other side, slanting in a diagonal toward the hills.

"It's now er never," muttered Zang. "When he hits them hills, I'll soon know if his camp is a blind."

Trevis moved leisurely, stopping now and then to survey the herd. To pass the time Zang scratched the top sod from a small area with his belt ax and to his surprise found gravel. Goug-ing into it he scooped out handful after handful, only to toss it away in disgust. Save for colors that did not mean even wages, the gravel was

barren. "I thought so," he grumbled. "I'll pan out one pan at his camp, an' if she don't show big, I'll take out after him. Thet there caribou hunt might be a blind fer him to hit out fer his real camp—if he thinks he's watched."

Ascertaining that Trevis had almost reached the foothills, Zang sprang alert. Hastily throwing his pack together, he picked up his rifle and sped toward Trevis's camp. "He ain't got a glass, er he'd of had it on them caribou," he panted as he covered the ground at a trot.

At the copse he threw off his pack and stood for a moment surveying the layout. Zang saw at a glance that Trevis had pitched his camp on a low gravel ridge that flattened as it receded from the river toward the point where he himself had spent his miserable two nights and a day. Here and there over a considerable area the coarse sod had been removed and shallow pits scooped into the gravel. The deepest of these was not more than three feet below the grass roots. Seizing Trevis's shovel he filled a pan and dived into the willows at the river's edge. Squatting at the point where a pile of discarded gravel bespoke Trevis's panning operations, he scooped up water, clawing the coarser gravel from the pan with his fingers, rotating the water,

clawing more gravel until, with a final flirt, he riddled the pan of water. "Good God!" he gasped as he stared for a moment into the bottom of the pan, "yellow as butter with virgin gold!" With trembling fingers he transferred the contents of the pan to a small sack, spilling some of the precious metal in his haste. "Better'n a half an ounce—an' right in the grass roots!"

Replacing the shovel and pan exactly as he had found them, he swung his pack to his shoulders, picked up his rifle, and with a hurried survey to make sure his moccasins had left no telltale tracks, he struck rapidly upriver, keeping within shelter of the bordering willows.

He waded belly-deep through the muck of the beaver wash into which he had tumbled, rather than disturb the vaulting pole that lay where Trevis had left it. Several times he stopped and with his glass swept the terrain for sight of Trevis. But the man was evidently in the edge of the foothills stalking the caribou herd.

At the foot of the long bald slope to the pass, Zang hesitated, keeping still within the shelter of the willows. Suppose Trevis had not stalked the caribou? Suppose he had glanced backward during those few moments it had taken Zang to fill the pan and again to return it and the

shovel to their places? Even with the naked eye the man might have discerned the movement on the ridge that showed above the tops of the stunted willows. And suppose Trevis had turned southward along the foothills, paralleling Zang's own course among the willows? And suppose he lay now with cocked rifle, waiting for the intruder to ascend that long bald slope. Zang shuddered. He had no doubt that Trevis was a capable man with a rifle.

Creeping to the edge of the willows, he uncased his glass and minutely scrutinized every foot of the higher ground that lay within rifle shot of the slope. No slightest sign of life revealed itself, but the area was dotted with detached rock fragments and clumps of stunted spruce—cover for a regiment. Only the long narrow slope to the pass was devoid of any sheltering stone or tree or bush. A marmot could not ascend that mile-long slope without becoming a fair target from a thousand points of ambush. The longer Zang pondered the possibilities, the more certain he became that Trevis lay in wait for him behind some sheltering rock fragment. Cold sweat broke out on his skin, and he moistened his dry lips with his tongue. "I got to go up," he mumbled in jerky guttural. "I don't dast

to go back—an' I can't stay here—I got to go."

Cocking his rifle, he stepped clear of the willows and waited. Nothing happened. "Waitin' fer me to git fer enough so's he kin git three, four shots in 'fore I kin git back in the willers," he mumbled in a voice that broke nervously from a whisper into deep bass. Gingerly he essayed another step and halted, his eyes darting from rock to rock for sight of the blue-black barrel of a rifle. A few more steps, and another halt. He was a fair target, now. Why in hell didn't the man shoot and be done with it? A few yards farther and he was well above the level of the plain. Fumblingly he drew out his glass and tried to focus it upon the distant caribou herd, cursing the trembling muscles that caused the field to waver and leap wildly. Swinging his pack to the ground he threw himself flat on his belly and, resting his glass on it, succeeded finally in picking up the scattered herd that showed as tiny dots in the far distance. Even as he looked the dots began to move—slowly at first, then swiftly, running crazily about—bunching into groups that merged with other groups, and broke away again. Gradually order formed out of chaos. The frantically plunging dots were converging into one long ribbon of dots—a ribbon that seemed

to be heading directly toward the man who lay with eyes glued to the glass.

With a hoarse cry of relief, Zang sprang erect, cased his glass, caught up his pack and rifle, and eyed the slope to the summit. "He shot into 'em! He's got 'em cut off where they come from, an' they're headin' fer this pass. Damn Trevis—he's got me plumb buffaloed! I'd go down to see him hung, if I dast to show up on the Yukon!"

Chapter XIII

CORPORAL DOWNEY TAKES A HAND

THE inspector looked up with a frown from the mass of papers that littered the flat-topped table in the new headquarters of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police in Dawson, as a staff sergeant entered and saluted. "There's a man here—says his name is Milroy, from White River. He wants to see you."

"Someone jump his claim? Can't you fellows handle him out there?"

"I rather think, sir, that you will want to hear what he has to say. He is reporting a murder somewhere in the White River country."

"Murder!" growled the inspector. "Fine time someone picked to pull off a murder! Show him in."

A man entered and stepped unhesitatingly toward the table behind which sat the inspector regarding him through narrowed eyes. "Milroy's my name, Inspector, Doc Milroy, from Cushing's Fort, on upper White River, near the line."

"Prospector?"

Milroy was aware that the other's eyes were boring him through. "No, sir," he answered. "I am—er—well, Inspector, to be perfectly frank with you, I'm a gambler."

"Someone killed over a card game?"

"No. A prospector—an old man known as Scotty McTague—was found murdered in his shack on Humm-o-pooch Creek, a tributary to the White River."

"How do you know he was murdered?"

"I personally inspected the body, which has been left just as found. The head had been bashed in, the hands and feet tied with babiche, the body bound up in a gill net, and the feet and face burned, evidently in an attempt to make the old man tell where his gold was cached. An ax lies beside the body with stains on it which are apparently dried blood and brains. Near it lies McTague's rifle, its barrel showing evidence of having been heated in the stove."

"Did you examine these things—pick them up—handle them?"

"I did not."

"Who found the body?"

"A prospector named Keller."

"And he reported it to you?"

"He reported it at Cushing's Fort. I was there at the time, and with another prospector went down to Humm-o-pooch and looked around a bit."

"Pretty hard outfit—that White River gang, aren't they?"

"Why, I don't know, Inspector. I haven't been there long. This is the first crime I've heard of up there."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

"Well—yes, sir. I do. A man named Brad Trevis—claims to have come from somewhere down on the Yukon."

The inspector spoke to the staff sergeant who stood just within the door. "Is Corporal Downey here?"

"Yes, sir. Just got in from Indian River an hour ago."

"Send him in."

Two minutes later a young officer stepped into the room and saluted smartly.

"Corporal Downey," said the inspector, "this man says he is Doc Milroy from Cushing's Fort on White River, up near the line. He reports that a prospector has been found murdered in his shack. You are to go up there and investigate the case. Take all the time you need, of course—

but you know how short-handed we are." He turned to Milroy. "Tell this officer everything you know that might have even a remote bearing on this case. And keep me posted on where to find you in case we want you for further questioning."

"Why, I'm going back. I thought I'd go on back with the officer. We can save considerable time that way."

"Good. You came down here at your own expense for the sole purpose of reporting this crime?"

"Yes, sir. I thought the police should know."

The inspector nodded, but Milroy failed to catch the glance that flashed from his eyes to the keen eyes of young Corporal Downey as he answered: "Of course the police should know. I take pleasure in personally thanking you for your interest in the matter. Down here men are gold mad—so damned busy filing claims, or jumping their neighbor's claims, that they wouldn't take time to report a murder if they tripped over the corpse. On your way, now—I'm up to my ears in work."

"How far is it to this Cushing's Fort?" asked Corporal Downey.

"About two hundred miles. It took us four

days to come down in a canoe. My Indian figures on ten days going back."

Downey turned to the inspector, who was already engrossed in his papers. "I can save three days on that trip—maybe even six, if the White River is navigable. That little steamboat that was seized at Circle is tied up here. Constable Doane can run her, and we can pick up an Injun to fire. They could run us up as far as she'll go, an' drop back here."

"Good idea. Take her. Anything to save time."

Two hours later, with an Indian stoker heaving cordwood into the firebox, Constable Doane nosed the wheezy little steamer from shore and breasted the current of the mighty Yukon. Milroy's Indian squatted silent on deck beside his canoe, in mortal terror lest the awesome fireboat rattle herself into oblivion; an eventuality that was by no means without the possibilities, as Downey and Milroy grinningly admitted as they felt the shivering and shuddering of every stick and timber of her, and listened to the clash and clang and knock of worn machinery, and the hiss of leaking steam.

"Wonder how far we can run her up the White River?" asked Downey.

"She's light draft," said Milroy. "The lower

river's shallow and sandy, with lots of bars and different channels, but no rocks that I noticed. We might run her up fifty or sixty miles. If so, we can make it from there to Cushing's Fort in two or three days, easy."

Downey produced a map. "This isn't accurate by a whole lot, but it's the best we've got. I figure it about seventy miles to the mouth of the White, and from there we'll shove her on till we run her nose in the sand. Personally," he added with a grin, "I wouldn't mind having hard ground under her bottom right now."

"She may hold together," laughed Milroy. "And if she does, we're sure saving a lot of upstream work, besides cutting our time in half."

The two moved up into the bow, where the noise and vibration were less noticeable. "Suppose you tell me what you know about this murder," said Downey, as the two seated themselves on a coil of rope. "An' I'll butt in with a question whenever I feel like it."

"Well, this old Scotty McTague—the man that was murdered—has been in the country quite a while, and was working what is generally conceded to be the best claim up there. In fact there's only one other claim that's paying much better than wages."

“Who owns this other claim?”

Milroy hesitated a moment, then answered: “Fellow named Zang.” He paused, slanting Downey a glance, but evidently the name meant nothing and, breathing easier, Milroy continued: “McTague was reputed to be taking out a lot of dust, but, except in payment for the barest necessities, he never spent an ounce of it. A couple of weeks ago a prospector named Keller came into Cushing’s and reported that he had found Scotty McTague dead in his shack. It seems he has a claim somewhere over beyond McTague’s, and on coming in to the fort for supplies, he stopped to see if McTague needed anything. He found McTague’s door closed, and receiving no answer to his yell, he pushed open the door and found McTague dead on the floor. His hands had been tied together with pieces of babiche line, and his feet, too. His body was wound up in a gill net, and his face and feet were burned in long blisters where someone had evidently tortured him in an effort to make him tell the location of his gold cache. Keller pulled the door to and made the distance to Cushing’s Fort in a day—which was going some, considering that it took us two days of good walking to go back there.”

"Who went back?"

"I did—another prospector and I. We tried to get Keller to go with us but he claimed he'd seen enough."

"What were you doing at Cushing's Fort?"

"I stay there."

"Prospector?"

"No, I make mine easier—cards."

"You say another man went back with you—who was that?"

"Zang."

"Why did you go to McTague's?"

"Why—somebody had to go. Cushing had no one to leave at the fort. He couldn't go. The police had to be notified. Anyone who would murder an old man that way—torture him till he told where his cache was—and then knocked him off—ought to be hung for it—and the quicker the better. We don't want him running loose on White River—murdering might get to be a habit."

"What was this Zang doing at the fort? He's the same Zang, I take it, that owns the other good claim?"

"Yes—he just happened to be in for supplies."

"Then you and Cushing are the only regular residents of the fort?"

"And, Nan—Cushing's daughter. But she's away about half the time, lugging grub to Si-washes. Then there are generally a few wood choppers hanging around."

"Well—go on. You and Zang went at once to McTague's shack. By the way,"—Corporal Downey paused and fished the stub of a pencil from his pocket—"let's get these locations down as near as we can on the map. Mark in Cushing's Fort and McTague's shack. I suppose it's on a creek."

"Yes, on Humm-o-pooch. It runs about in here, and the shack is pretty well up to the head of it—about there, I'd say." Milroy sketched in the creek and the location of the shack.

"And where is Zang's layout?"

"Oh, that's over on Owl Creek. I don't know where it is—but it's way off to the south—the other side of White River."

"Go on."

"Zang and I went down to McTague's and found things just as Keller had said. The weather had been hot, and McTague was kind of high. We had to let the shack air out for an hour before we could even stick our heads in. Finally we stepped just inside the door and sized up the layout. Beside McTague on the floor lay an ax

with what appeared to be blood and brains dried on it. Nearer the stove was McTague's rifle. The end of it looked as though it had been heated in the stove. It was discolored and had light wood ashes clinging to it."

"Did you handle anything—pick up the ax or the rifle? Or did Zang?"

"No. The damned fool started to pick up the ax, but I stopped him. I told him the police would want to look for fingerprints. He'd never heard of fingerprints—didn't know what I was talking about—but he didn't touch the ax, or anything else."

"And you didn't investigate further? You stopped just inside the door—what did you do, then?"

"No," lied Milroy, "we didn't go any further. We were like Keller—we'd seen enough. And, besides, the air was so putrid, we both began to be sick."

"And then you returned to Cushing's?"

"No," answered Milroy, "we didn't. We closed the door and went and sat on the sluice box. First, though, we hunted around to see if we could find where the murderer had looted McTague's cache. But there was no evidence of any cache, either looted or intact."

"I was going to ask you about that," said Downey. "A while back you spoke as though you believed that McTague had told the murderer where his cache was. If you didn't find the looted cache, why do you believe McTague told?"

"I've got two or three reasons." Milroy paused and lighted a cigar, while Downey filled his pipe. "And I believe you'll agree that they're damned good reasons, too. To go back a little—about two months and a half ago a fellow blew into Cushing's from down on the Yukon—big, husky brute—good-looking, too. Said his name was Brad Trevis. He was nearly broke, so he chopped cord wood for a month to raise a grub stake. Then he hit for the hills—broke, except for his outfit. Later the story filtered up from the Yukon that he'd skipped out of Dawson just a few jumps ahead of a husband with a gun, pausing only long enough to bet his claim against a quarter of a million and lose it. Maybe you heard about it."

Corporal Downey nodded. "Seems to me I did hear somethin' about it. Kind of a nasty story; but not a police matter."

"You're damned right it's a nasty story," agreed Milroy, so emphatically that Downey

slanted him a keen glance. "And maybe when Nan Cushing hears it from you, she'll believe it!"

"Nan Cushing!"

"Yes—this Trevis has been shining up to her. And when she heard the story she refused to believe it. That's the way with women—they believe what they good and damned want to believe."

Downey nodded, somberly, his mind flashing back for an instant to his own shattered romance. The bitter cynicism of youth had not yet ripened into the mellow philosophy that was to make the name of Corporal Downey a legend of the service. "All right," he said. "Go on. This Trevis hit for the hills—broke?"

"Yes—and bear in mind that this country has been prospected for years by men who know it, and who know gold, and only two claims are paying better than wages—and neither one of them could be called a real strike. Well, Trevis hit for the hills—and in thirty days he was back—and *he banked over seven hundred ounces of dust!* It's in Cushing's safe right now. Better than ten thousand dollars in a month! There happened to be quite a bunch of the boys in from the hills the day he came back—and within two hours

there wasn't a man left around the fort but Cushing and Zang and me, and a few wood choppers that were too broke to stampede."

"Tryin' to back-trail Trevis to his strike, eh?"

"No. Some of 'em knew that Trevis had built a pole shack on Little Caribou, and was working a claim there. So they hit for Little Caribou. In a few days they came back. They'd panned Trevis's shaft, and they'd pitted the whole creek bottom with test holes and found just what they'd have found in any other creek in the hills—wages. When they got back Trevis was gone again. Some of 'em tried to trail him, but they couldn't. Ten days later Keller came in with the news of McTague's murder. Do you see the point?"

Downey nodded, thoughtfully. "Meanin' that Trevis never made no strike. That it was McTague's gold be banked."

"Exactly! What could be simpler? It don't stand to reason that a greenhorn could come into the country and make a strike right off the bat, where experienced men have never made one, does it?"

"Well—it ain't likely. But you can't never tell. Gold's where you find it, they say. An' you didn't find where he'd looted McTague's cache."

"We didn't hunt very thoroughly. We didn't have time."

"What was your hurry?"

"We wanted to get to Little Caribou. As I said, after we hunted for the cache we went and sat on the sluice box to take a smoke. We were talking. Zang commented on Trevis's strike and the fact that no gold had been found on his claim. It was then that the idea struck us that it was McTague's gold Trevis was banking—and not any gold he had shoveled out of the gravel. I happened to look down and a glint of something yellow caught my eye. I reached down and picked up a ring. It was a seal ring, with the initials B. L. T. in monogram on a green stone—a ring *I had seen on Trevis's finger!* Cushing told me afterward that he, too, had noticed the ring."

"H-m-m-m," said Downey. "Looks now like we're gettin' down to somethin' more like evidence. Let's see the ring."

"I haven't got it. I returned it, as nearly as possible, to the exact spot where I found it. The only difference is, I covered it with a bit of bark, so any chance passer-by would fail to see it. I didn't know but what its position might mean something to an experienced investigator."

"You done right," admitted Downey. "An'

then, you say, you went to Little Caribou? Let's get that down on the map, near as you can."

Milroy located the creek and returned the pencil. "Yes, we went up there and searched Trevis's shack. We thought maybe he'd packed McTague's gold up there and cached it, figuring that no one would bother Little Caribou after they had learned there was no gold there. But we found no gold. We did find something, however, that to my mind absolutely clinches the case against Trevis. We found, concealed beneath the rushes that form the mattress for his bunk, Scotty McTague's watch! It is a huge affair of silver—the granddad of all watches. Everyone in the country knows it. They've kidded McTague about it for years. Trevis was the damndest fool in the world for taking that watch!"

"They all make mistakes," said Downey, thoughtfully, looking squarely into Milroy's eyes. "Just give a man rope enough—an' if he's guilty he'll hang himself, every time. You're sure that was McTague's watch? Did you pick it up an' look at it good?"

Milroy laughed. "Wait till you see it," he said. "No—I didn't have to examine it closely. Just ran my hand under the rushes and felt something

hard, and lifted the rushes up, and saw the watch, and left things as they were."

"Maybe it would have be'n better to have taken the watch along. There's nothin' to prevent Trevis from goin' back there an' makin' away with it."

Milroy shrugged. "I didn't want the damned thing on me. Someone might accuse me of knocking off Scotty McTague."

"Zang was along for a witness?"

"Yes," answered Milroy, dryly. "But, as long as I haven't got the watch, I'm not going to need any witness."

"There's somethin' in that, too," grinned Downey. "If we find things like you've said, I guess we ain't goin' to have no great amount of trouble in figurin' out who killed McTague. There's jest one thing I ain't quite got the straight of. You said Zang didn't hit out on that stampede to Little Caribou. Cushing, I take it, couldn't leave his place. An' you said the wood choppers was broke. An' you ain't a prospector. But Zang is. Why didn't Zang go?"

Milroy grinned. "Zang wasn't in shape to go anywhere just then. He's a good deal of a swash-buckler and bully, especially when he's drinking. He had locked horns with Trevis for the second

time, and for the second time Trevis had polished him off to a fare-ye-well. His eyes were swelled shut, his nose was broken, or at least, badly bent, and all in all, he was a pretty sick lad. Toward evening he got his eyes open a little and hit for home, and it was ten days before he showed up again—the day Keller brought in the news of McTague's murder."

"Where's Zang now?"

"Out in the hills trying to locate Trevis. I figured you fellows were pretty busy down on the Yukon and that if we could save you any time, you'd appreciate it. Trevis trades at Cushing's Fort, but if we could locate his hide-out it might save you a month or six weeks of hanging around waiting for him to show up."

Corporal Downey grinned. "An' then, if Zang should happen to locate Trevis's strike, you two could file the claim while Trevis was waitin' to get hung."

"Hell's bells!" exclaimed Milroy. "What are you talking about? We have located it—McTague was Trevis's strike!"

"Sure," answered Downey, absently. "I'd fer-got for a minute. An' I'm mighty obliged to you two for the way you've handled this case. I don't know when I've seen men outside the police take

such an interest. It sure has made my job plumb easy."

"Well," grinned Milroy, "I don't believe you could call it a purely altruistic interest on the part of either one of us. Zang hates Trevis and fears him. He also has the next best claim in the country—and he don't want to be the next killee. As for me, it's common knowledge that I've got some heavy dust in Cushing's safe. Sometime I may want to hit out of here with that dust, and I'd breathe easier on the trail if I didn't have to worry about a very capable murderer laying for me at every bend of the river. And aside from that, while McTague was no particular friend of mine, anyone who would torture an old man and then bash his head in has got everything coming the law will do to him—and then some."

"Yump," said Downey. "But if this McTague is the bird I think he is—or was, rather—if I was you I wouldn't lose no sleep over his demise. The dust he dug out of that claim was prob'ly the first honest money he ever come by."

"And it cost him his life!" exclaimed Milroy, thoughtfully. "That's the irony of fate—and food for the philosopher. Moral—never make an honest dollar."

"If," corrected Downey, "you ain't used to it.

They'd have us believe that in the long run a man gets about what's comin' to him. An' maybe they're right. It does work out that way—sometimes." He yawned, stretched prodigiously, and slipping from the coil of rope, sprawled on the warm deck. "Me—I'm goin' to catch me some sleep."

Chapter XIV

OLD CUSH TALKS

DESPITE leaking steam, the rattle and clang of her machinery, and the vibration that threatened momentarily to shake the ribs out of her, the little steamboat made extraordinarily good time against the current. "She'll walk away from any of the big boats," shouted Constable Doane, with his lips close to Corporal Downey's ear as, late in the evening, they headed inshore to tie up at the mouth of White River. "They used her for smugglin', an' she's got the works for a boat twice her size."

Two evenings later, after innumerable groundings and backings off and searching for deeper channels, Doane rammed her hard aground on a submerged bar some sixty miles up White River from the mouth. Sounding from the canoe failed to locate a navigable channel, and when after a couple of hours' strenuous work she was afloat again, Downey ordered Doane to return to Dawson.

Proceeding with pole, paddle, and track line, Downey and Milroy made good time, and on the

evening of the third day beached the canoe at the foot of the high bluff and ascended the sidling path that led upward to Cushing's Fort.

Behind his bar, Old Cush acknowledged Milroy's introduction of Corporal Downey with a nod, and with the deftness of long practice swung a bottle and glasses from the back bar and shoved them toward the two. "Made a quick trip," he vouchsafed, as they poured their liquor.

"Four days going down and six coming back. We made the run from Dawson to within seventy-five or eighty miles of here with a steamboat. We've been three days coming on from there."

"Didn't s'pose a steamboat could git that fer upriver," said Cush. "One come up 'bout fifteen-twenty mile couple years ago an' run her nose in the sand so damn hard they had to wait fer high water to float her. I s'pose in couple more years we won't be able to sleep fer the whistlin'."

Milroy laughed. "I guess we're safe for a while yet. This was a small boat, and we ran her aground on an average of once every two hours. Corporal Downey came up to investigate the McTague murder."

Old Cush received the information without comment.

"I take it, from what Milroy has told me, that

there's no question but what the man was murdered," hazarded Downey, his eyes on the older man's face.

"I couldn't say."

The young officer frowned slightly. "But you heard what the man, Keller, had to say of finding the body, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"And Milroy and Zang told you what they found out there on the creeks?"

"Yeah."

"And yet you don't believe the man was murdered?"

Old Cush spat, shifted his quid, and his pale blue eyes met Downey's squarely. "I didn't say I didn't believe he was murdered; neither I didn't say I did. McTague's either dead or he ain't. If he is, he was either murdered or he wasn't. What I believe or don't believe don't cut no figger whatever. I've learnt neither to believe nor disbelieve anythin' I hear—an' only part of what I see. It's like this:" Turning to the back bar, Cushing selected a bottle, plainly labeled as the product of a well-known distillery, and duly sealed with the government stamp. He handed the bottle across the bar to Milroy, who accepted it with a puzzled expression. "Now,

young man, you tell me jest what you seen."

"Why, I saw you take a bottle of whiskey from the back bar and pass it to Milroy."

"Mebbe you did," said Old Cush, dryly, "an' agin mebbe you didn't. You seen me pick up a bottle an' hand it to Milroy. The *of whiskey* part is only what you believe. The chances is, the stuff in that bottle is whiskey—but it might be tea or anything else that's the same color."

Corporal Downey regarded the older man thoughtfully. Here was a philosopher—a man, evidently, of few words—but of much wisdom. A square man and a just one; he marveled, for the unsavory reputation of the upper White River was common talk on the Yukon. "You're right," he said, at length. "Dead right." And then, abruptly: "Do you know Brad Trevis?"

"Does one man ever know another?" countered Cush.

"But you've seen him? Talked to him? Hired him? Traded with him?"

Cush nodded. "With a fellow that claimed his name was Brad Trevis, yes."

Downey smiled. "You're accustomed to doubt the names men go by?"

"I might wonder, mebbe; but I don't never doubt."

"Did this Trevis look or act like a murderer?"

"I couldn't say. I don't know, for sure, if I ever seen one."

"You look to me like a keen judge of men——"

"I judge no man," interrupted the other.

"An estimator, a sizer-up of men, then. What I'd like to know is whether Trevis impresses you as one who would murder another for gold?"

"He could be a murderer, or a preacher, or both, or neither one—which it wouldn't be none of my affairs, so long as he didn't do no murderin' or preachin' on my property; both of which, I don't allow neither one, on account it's bad fer business."

"Look here," cut in Downey, with more than a trace of impatience in his tone, "I'm up here to investigate a reported murder. And if I find that a crime has been committed, my job will be to run down and arrest the criminal. In this case I'm more than an officer of the law. I'm an agent of justice. You don't look to me like a man who would condone a murder with the basest of motives behind it—robbery. And yet your attitude seems to be to give out no information whatever."

Old Cush nodded slowly, and in somber

silence poured and tossed off a liberal drink. "Now you've spoke your piece, son," he said, at length, "let me tell one: In the first place, it's a damn sight more important to me than it is to you, if such a murderer as you described is loose an' rampin' around these hills. I live here; an' you don't. I've got a daughter that lives here. That big safe in the corner is damn near full of gold—my gold an' the gold of others. Mebbe you think I'm settin' pretty with a murderin' robber loose in the hills. Take this here case, now—McTague had a damn good claim. He worked it a long time. He was a close spender. Some of them that has gold banks it with me. McTague didn't. It's reasonable to figger that he had a lot of gold cached somewheres. If he did, an' someone murdered him, the murderer either got the gold or he didn't. If he did, it hadn't ort to be so hard to find the empty cache; if he didn't git the gold it's still in McTague's cache—an' no one is spendin' it or bankin' it."

"Hell!" interrupted Milroy. "That's no argument! Suppose we couldn't find the empty cache? Suppose the murderer was slick enough to cover up all trace of the looted cache?"

"'Twouldn't be so easy—an' him in a hurry," commented Old Cush, dryly.

"How do you know he was in a hurry? He could have——"

"By God," interrupted Cushing, "I'd of be'n! An' so would you—or any other man!"

"But the fact remains," retorted Milroy, almost savagely, "that McTague was murdered—and that soon thereafter Trevis comes in here and banks better than seven hundred ounces, and he was broke a month before. And Corporal Downey can verify the rest of the evidence—the evidence of the ring and the watch—for himself, whether we find the empty cache, or not."

"Yeah," admitted Old Cush, sagely, "they's this an' that to consider."

"Where in hell did Trevis get all that dust if it wasn't out of McTague's cache?" Milroy demanded.

"Where does all gold come from—yourn an' mine an' everyone else's?"

"Hell's bells! There's no such a strike as that in these hills!"

"Who says so?" asked Cush, dryly.

"I do! And so will anyone else that knows this country."

"Kin you prove it?"

"You talk like a damned fool, Cush!" cried the exasperated Milroy. "I could have told

Corporal Downey he wouldn't get anything out of you."

Corporal Downey was conscious of a sudden thrill. The pale blue, piercing eyes shifted from Milroy to stare squarely into his own, and as the older man spoke, apparently more to himself than to the gambler, the young officer noted a slight though unmistakable flutter of the left eyelid as his words issued slowly from a face as sombre as doom: "No, he didn't git nothin' out of me. An' it's riled him more'n what it has you. You can't git blood out of a stone; an' no more you can't git no information about a thing out of a man that ain't got none. Me—I don't even know McTague is dead. If he was murdered, I hope the man that done it gits what's comin' to him. If this here young man is smart—an' the evidence is plain as what you say—his job hadn't ort to be hard. I was jest thinkin' how it would be hell if he was to pick up the wrong man."

Chapter XV

AT THE SHACK OF SCOTTY MCTAGUE

MILE after mile, up creeks and across ridges, skirting mountains and fording rivers, Corporal Downey followed while Doc Milroy led the way next morning to Humm-o-pooch Creek and the shack of Scotty McTague. It was plain that the gambler was no woodsman. A half-dozen times he paused, undecided as to the course, and once led off four or five miles up the wrong fork of a creek. The breath needed for the ascent of ridges he wasted cursing the flies and mosquitoes, the heat, and the whole country in general. He halted frequently to rest, despite the fact that Downey was packing the supplies for both, while he carried only his blankets.

As Downey followed easily in the wake of the laboring man, he pondered the problem before him. Three questions confronted him: Who killed Scotty McTague? Was the killer in possession of McTague's gold? Why was Milroy so vitally interested in fastening the crime upon Brad Trevis?

For no man would punish himself as Milroy was now punishing himself unless his interest were vital; nor would he have made a trip involving four hundred miles of river trail to inform the police that a prospector had been killed in the hills. His stated reason for his interest in the case—that at some time he might want to move his gold down to the Yukon, and feared that he might be waylaid by the murderer en route—was so palpably a studied explanation that Downey dismissed it with a grin. He also dismissed the thought that Milroy was the murderer. But did he know who did commit the murder? If so, he could easily be in position to share the loot, which, according to his own statement and Cushing's, should be considerable.

Or was Trevis's interest in Nan Cushing, and the girl's refusal to believe ill of him, the sole reason? Old Cush, with his huge safe full of gold, would be a father-in-law well worth attaining, and Downey did not doubt that before the appearance of Brad Trevis the suave gambler had looked upon the girl as already his own. Else why should a gambler remain at an isolated spot like Cushing's Fort, where the scant population of the district was hard put to sluice out wages, when down on the Yukon men were pouring

their dust out like water? The girl, Downey decided, was the main motive for Milroy's hatred of Trevis—and he was not at all sure that the gambler did not actually believe Trevis guilty.

Be that as it may, there was no doubt that Old Cush entertained no such suspicion. Downey grinned to himself as he recalled the evasive answers and the shrewd observations with which the wily old man had warned him against Milroy before Milroy's very ears, and yet had said nothing with which Milroy could later confront him.

Young Downey drew the air deeply into his lungs. For the most part his work on the Yukon had been confined to matters concerning the customs and the mails and the settling of claim disputes among prospectors. But this was a worthwhile case—a case such as the avid young officer loved. And, down through the years, it was the solving of just such cases that, in the outlands, was to make the name of Corporal Downey a name to conjure with. But all that lay veiled by the future. Just now, as he followed along behind Milroy, his thoughts drifted from the matter in hand to the not too distant past. Was it his speculation upon the influence of the woman in the case that turned his thoughts to his own blasted life? Bitterly he recalled the days and the

nights of long patrols, the grueling physical labor, and the brain rack with which he had attacked his duties that he might win the coveted promotion so that he could marry Margot Molaire—his dream girl—the daughter of the factor at Lashing Water Post. Cynically he remembered the thrill with which he had received that promotion. And with a poignant pain he recalled his joyous journey to Lashing Water, when the long miles had seemed as nothing beneath his footsteps and the strokes of his paddle, to find, at the end of the trail, his dream girl—the wife of another. It was then he had vowed his strange vow—never to accept another promotion. He would stick to the service. But he would remain Corporal Downey to the end. Never would there be a Sergeant Downey or an Inspector Downey or Superintendent Downey. "Promotions are dead sea ashes," he muttered bitterly. "An' all women are poison."

It was nearly dark on the evening of the second day out from Cushing's that they came upon the spot beside the trout pool where Milroy and Zang had camped for the night on the occasion of their last visit to McTague's.

The gambler recognized the spot with an exclamation of genuine relief. "We're all right

now! I know where we are!" Despite aching muscles and the strain of uncertainty that had gripped him ever since leaving Cushing's Fort, he returned Corporal Downey's grin. "Oh, you can laugh! But this trip has been no fun for me. I suppose you fellows that are used to it and savvy the hill country can follow any trail you've been over once without even hesitating. But I've been over this one twice, and I'll be damned if I've known where I was more than half the time in the past two days. Half a dozen times I've been on the point of turning back to Cushing's and hiring a Siwash to guide us, but every time I had the luck to spot some landmark that looked familiar, and I'd make for it. But I know this place. We'll camp here to-night and slip over to McTague's the first thing in the morning. It's only two or three miles. You get the fire going and I'll jerk our supper out of the pool. If you can fry trout like Zang can, we'll sure celebrate this night with a grand feed."

Corporal Downey could—and did. And after the two had dined to repletion on crisp golden brown trout and black tea, he filled his pipe and settled back with a sigh of contentment: "This is the life for a man. Milroy, you ought to turn prospector."

The other flexed his muscles and stretched prodigiously. "Not me—it's too damned hard work. I'd never like it—though I might get used to it. I'm not nearly so tired as I was last night."

Downey grinned. "Do you know why?" he asked.

"Why, I'm getting broken in to the work, I suppose."

"Guess again."

Milroy look puzzled. "What else could it be?"

"Think back an hour, or an hour and a half. I'll bet you were just as tired when you climbed that last ridge as you were when you climbed the last ridge the night before."

"Guess that's right," admitted the other. "Damned if I remember ever being any tireder."

"It's all in your head, this tired business. You haven't done enough either day to make any healthy man tired. It was mental strain that tired you—not muscle strain. As soon as you knew for sure where you were, you quit bein' tired. It's worry that takes it out of a man—not work."

"I believe you're right," admitted Milroy. "But if I'd been any good I wouldn't have had to worry. I'd have known I was on the right trail."

"I don't know—that wasn't such an easy trail to remember—fer a man that ain't used to trailin'. Take it all in all, I think you done pretty damn good. Now how about the trail from McTague's to Trevis's shack on Little Caribou?"

"That's easy. All we've got to do is to keep those mountains to our right for six or seven miles, and we'll hit Big Caribou, and follow it up to where Little Caribou runs into it, then follow up Little Caribou to the forks, and take the east fork right to his shack. It's about thirty miles, Zang said. We made it in a day. There are almost no ridges to climb."

"Guess I'll roll in," said Downey. "We'll be gettin' an early start."

At McTague's next morning Milroy paused beside the sluice box and lifted the bit of bark beneath which he had concealed Trevis's ring. "There it is," he said. "Just as near as I could replace it to the spot where it first caught my eye."

Downey picked up the ring, examined it, and thrust it into his pocket. Then he turned toward the shack. Milroy hung back. A moment later even Downey retreated before the horrible odor that all but overpowered him as he pushed open the door. "Guess we'll let her air out for a while,"

he said. "There's nothin' stinks like rotten man meat. We can be puttin' in the time huntin' McTague's cache."

"We won't find it," predicted Milroy. "Zang and I couldn't."

For two hours the two devoted themselves to a minute search that took in every inch of ground within a radius of a hundred yards from the shack.

"We'll lay off fer a spell an' have a look inside," said Downey, when the circuit had been completed. "Then we'll tackle her again."

Once again Milroy halted at the door. "Hell's bells! You can't go in there. You can't stand it—no one can."

"It ain't no violet patch," admitted the officer. "But I never heard of anyone gettin' stunk to death—so here goes. You can stay here if you like."

In the hot interior of the closed cabin corruption had been rapid. One glance at the corpse showed the futility of any attempt at identification—an unimportant matter, anyway, as at least three men could be summoned who had viewed the body while yet it had retained some semblance to human features. Standing just inside the doorway, he subjected the room to careful scrutiny as his eyes became accustomed

to the gloom. Nearly everything in the cabin showed evidence of having been displaced. The bedding from the bunk lay in a heap on the floor. The rushes had been thrust to one side, and the poles upon which they had rested had been torn away. Here and there the rudely split spruce puncheons had been pried loose and tossed aside in an effort to locate a cache beneath the floor.

Downey's eyes had become accustomed to the half-light, and still standing, just within the door, his glance was attracted by a mark in the loose earth that lay exposed where a puncheon had been removed about halfway between the door and the bunk. A swift glance showed him that Milroy had withdrawn to the sluice box, where he sat smoking. Whipping a folding steel rule from his pocket, Downey stepped past the corpse, dropped to his hands and knees, and carefully calipered the mark. It was a human foot track—a foot track he had come to know—having been following it for a matter of two days. Standing erect, he smiled as he noted the position of the buckskin vest that hung from the stanchion—a vest glazed with dirt, the pocket of which sagged open as though a heavy object had been removed—for instance, a thick silver watch. "Friend Milroy was mistaken," he murmured,

"when he said he had not ventured beyond the doorway."

Stepping over the body he retrieved the ax and the rifle, being careful to grasp them at points least liable to record fingerprints. Then, with one last look around, during which the interior of that little room was indelibly photographed on his brain, he stepped out into the sunshine and breathed deeply of the clean air. Walking to the sluice box, he busied himself for an hour with fine powder and a camera. The work finished, he carefully wrapped the rifle and the ax in many layers of waxed paper, which he secured with windings of thread.

"Trevis must be a large man," he commented to Milroy, who had been an interested spectator.

"He is. Stands six feet, or better. I'd say about two hundred and fifteen or twenty pounds of damned good bone and muscle."

"No wonder he trimmed this Zang," grinned Downey. "A man that size ought to handle 'most anyone."

Milroy laughed. "Big as he is, Zang's bigger. He's got a couple of inches on Trevis in height, and at least forty pounds in weight. He's thicker in the paunch—but even so, he's nobody's toy. Trevis was the first man that ever floored him.

What'll we do now—hit for Little Caribou?"

Downey grinned. "Not till we clean up our chores around here. All corpses, says the manual, has got to be decently buried."

"Buried!" cried Milroy, aghast. "You don't mean we've got to bury—that! Good God, man! Your clothes stink yet—and you didn't touch him, did you?"

Downey shook his head. "It ain't goin' to be no perfumer's convention, at that. No, I didn't touch him. I'm jest wonderin'. I seen by the paper a while back where some lord or earl or duke died down in Montreal an' they cremated him. Now, if crematin' wasn't decent, they wouldn't have pulled it off on a lord or earl or duke, would they?"

"Sure they wouldn't! And cremation is a common form of burial, anyway. Back in the States there's a crematory in every city."

"It said they shipped this party's ashes back to England in an urn, which, I take it, is some kind of a can, or box."

"More like a vase," supplied Milroy.

"Well, we ain't got no vases along, so Mc-Tague will have to get along without. He ain't got to be shipped, nohow. An' the way it looks to me, if this here lord, or whatever he was, is

only one vase ahead of him in the end, McTague ain't got no kick comin'. It's prob'ly the closest he ever was to nobility in his life."

"You're dead right, Corporal," laughed Milroy. "Let's touch her off. I believe you spoke of some other chore?"

"Yump—got to hunt around some more fer McTague's cache. If the murderer found it, the chances is he didn't spend no hell of a while coverin' it up after he'd emptied it."

"I'll bet he did. This Trevis is a cool head. He's smart. I'll bet two to one he took his time and covered his trail so we won't find a thing."

"I ain't bettin'. But it don't look to me like a man's so damn smart that would leave his fingerprints stickin' out like a sore thumb on that ax an' rifle. An' it ain't a smart man's trick to leave his seal ring layin' around the scene of his crime. An' I don't figure he took his time with the cache, when he sure as hell tore through that shack in a hurry. The stuff's throw'd around in there, regardless. Me an' you differs. You say, 'smart an' leisurely'; I say, 'dumb an' scairt.' An', bein' as I'm runnin' the show, we'll hunt around anyways till dark, an' hit fer Little Caribou in the mornin'."

As the flames roared and crackled about the

little shack and sent billowing rolls of smoke down the valley, Corporal Downey and Milroy continued the search for the cache. And long after the shack had become only a pile of smoldering ashes they worked, only ceasing when the long twilight faded into night.

But though they explored the little valley from rim to rim for a quarter of a mile either way from the shack, no trace of a cache was found.

That night, as he lay between his blankets, Corporal Downey smiled to himself—grimly.

Chapter XVI

DOC MILROY HAS A PLAN

LATE the following evening the two halted before Trevis's shack on Little Caribou, and in the gathering gloom Corporal Downey studied the ground before the door. "No one's be'n here fer several days—mebbe not since you an' Zang was here," he pronounced. Pushing open the door, he entered, closely followed by Milroy.

The gambler struck a match, and crossing to the table held the flame to the wick of a candle held erect by means of a few drops of grease on a can lid. "Someone has been here since we were," he said. "There was no candle on the table then." As the candle settled to a steady flame, his eyes flashed swiftly about the room. The bunk, with its blanket-covered mattress of sedge, was apparently as he had left it. "It was Trevis," he added suddenly, pointing to a couple of shirts that depended from pegs driven into the wall. "When we were here, two clean shirts, one dark blue and the other a red and black check, hung

there. Now there are two black and white checked dirty ones."

Stepping across the room, Corporal Downey removed the shirts from their pegs and examined them minutely. "They're a big man's shirts," he said, returning them to their places. "Prob'ly Trevis, all right—unless, maybe, Zang."

Milroy laughed. "You wouldn't get Zang into this room voluntarily. Trevis has got him plumb buffaloed. I wanted to sleep in the shack the last time we were here, but Zang wouldn't hear to it. Threatened to pull out and leave me. So we went across the ridge and camped in the brush."

"Prob'ly Trevis, then," opined Downey. "Must of be'n here in the night, or he wouldn't have lit a candle. With the fast water here, it ain't no mosquito hole, so if he come in the daytime he'd of left the door open fer light. Prob'ly if he come in the daytime he'd of washed his shirts, too. Unless a man's got a lot of 'em he generally keeps washed up kind of clost."

"In which case, he probably either packed in some more of McTague's gold and cached it, or he removed another batch to bank with Cushing."

"Might of," admitted Downey. "A man

wouldn't go no hell of a ways jest to change his shirt. If Zang had had sense enough to hang around here, maybe he could have trailed him to where he was goin'."

"Maybe he did," said Milroy. "We'll know in the morning. I know where he'd have watched from. And the chances are he'd have camped just beyond the ridge where we camped before."

"Where'd you say that watch is?"

"It *was* under the rushes of the bunk—back toward the wall, near the foot."

Doubling the blanket back, Downey carefully raised the rushes, and with a grunt of satisfaction reached beneath them and withdrew the huge silver watch, which he held up by its thong. "This here is Exhibit B, is it?" he asked.

"That's it. No one who ever saw it could mistake it."

Downey grinned. "It looks plumb able," he said. "I s'pose the machinery in it was made big a-purpose so if it got out of whack a man could tinker it up with a monkey wrench or whatever tools was layin' around handy. Where jewelry stores is scarce, a watch like that would be a comfort to a man, providin' he could hire an Injun cheap to pack it."

Milroy laughed. "You're a droll one, Downey.

Who was it said that a Britisher had no sense of humor?"

"I ain't a Britisher," denied Downey. "My father was Scotch an' my mother was born in the States. I'm a Saskatchewanian by birth."

"Which, also," grinned the gambler, "must be a comfort to a man, providing he could hire a cheap Siwash to pack a geography."

Careful not to touch the metal or the glass, Corporal Downey carried the watch to the table where, for a long time, he sat with a magnifying glass to his eye, slowly passing the watch back and forth, twisting and turning and slanting it in the yellow light of the candle. Behind his back Milroy grinned, glanced for an instant at his finger tips, and began a minute scrutiny of the cabin. Ten minutes later he paused abruptly, stared for a second, hastily refitted a slab of bark to its place in one of the larger lower logs, and shot a swift glance at the back of the officer, who was still examining the watch. Methodically he continued his search. But this time it was Downey who grinned. Milroy had overlooked the fact that the polished back of a large silver watch may serve as an excellent mirror.

Early the following morning the two climbed the ridge and explored the pinnacle Zang had

used as a lookout, and the site where he and Milroy had camped for the night. "Someone's camped here fer several days, maybe a week. I guess there ain't no question but what Zang laid fer his man. The question is—could he foller him?"

"Zang is reputed a good man in the hills," Milroy ventured. "But, I suppose, so is Trevis."

Returning to the shack, Downey seated himself and drummed thoughtfully on the table with his fingers. "It looks," he said, finally, "like we've got a pretty clear case. All we've got to do, now, is to get our man."

"You're right!" exclaimed Milroy, eagerly.

"I suppose the best thing would be to go back to Cushing's. Then, if Zang——"

"I've been thinking it over," interrupted Milroy, "and it figures about like this: if Zang succeeds in trailing Trevis, he'll hunt me up—either here, figuring we are out in the hills—or at Cushing's. If he doesn't succeed there's no telling when he will locate him—maybe not until he can lay for him and trail him again. That may be a long time. On the other hand Trevis must go to Cushing's at intervals for supplies. But he may have been there recently, and his next trip may be a month in the future. Zang and I were

here less than three weeks ago, and we know that Trevis has been here at least twice in that time. Therefore, it's safe to assume that he comes here oftener than he goes to Cushing's." The man paused and Downey nodded agreement.

"So far," he admitted, "your reasonin' seems sound."

"It is sound. And the plan I propose seems sound, also. Merely, that one of us stays here and the other goes to Cushing's. In that way we double our chances of gathering him in."

Again, Downey nodded approval. "Sure would," he agreed. "Would you rather go to Cushing's, or stay here?"

Milroy smiled. "If it were a matter of choice, I had much rather go to Cushing's. But, as a matter of fact, I can't. That is, not without going clear back around by McTague's, and God knows whether I could follow that trail again or not. I wouldn't bet on it. You see, I've never gone directly from here to Cushing's Fort. Zang and I came here by way of McTague's and returned the same way——" He paused abruptly. Even with the words on his lips Milroy knew he had blundered.

"Why?" asked Corporal Downey, bluntly, his eyes on the other's face. He knew that the gam-

bler had suddenly realized his blunder, and it was with a distinct sense of admiration that he sat regarding the man who by not so much as the flutter of an eyelash betrayed any emotion. It was the most perfect exhibition of poker face Downey had ever seen.

Milroy grinned. "You've got me nailed to the cross, Corporal. No man cares to admit of mercenary motives in a case like this. I had rather hoped to keep that part a secret. When we failed to locate McTague's gold here, we returned to Humm-o-pooch and hunted again. Had we found it we would have recached it—for ourselves. The ethics of such procedure, are, of course, indefensible—but a professional gambler soon learns not to allow ethics to stand between him and his sleep. As a partial defense I will say that the gold could be of no further use to its rightful owner—and certainly Trevis didn't deserve it."

"There's somethin' in that, maybe," smiled Downey. "Anyway, you didn't find it, so there's no harm done."

"Hell's bells!" exclaimed Milroy, struck by a sudden thought. "I forgot that you don't know the way back to Cushing's any more than I do! All I know is that it isn't very far. The prospectors made it in a good deal less than a

half a day when they stampeded down here."

"It wouldn't bother me none to find it," said Downey. "We hit out northeast to McTague's, an' from there we come a little south of due west. A compass course due south from here would hit the White River not very far one way or the other from Cushing's."

"But suppose you did hit the river, how would you know whether you were above or below the fort?"

"Wouldn't miss it but a few miles—an' I just come seventy or eighty miles up to it, didn't I? If I seen a place I'd passed I'd know it, an' know I was downstream. If I come out on the river where I hadn't be'n before, I'd be upstream. Hell, it's plain as the nose on your face."

"Exactly!" laughed Milroy. "The nose on my face is plain as day to you—to me it's invisible. In the first place, I didn't know we hit northeast to McTague's and then south of west to here. I traveled by landmarks. Then, I couldn't follow a compass course if I had to. And again, all the bends of the White River look alike to me. I wouldn't know whether I was above or below the fort."

"Such bein' the case," said Downey, "it looks like I'm elected to go."

"Of course," he added, as he made ready his pack, "if Zang comes along you won't have no trouble reachin' the fort. But what you goin' to do if Trevis shows up?"

"I've figured that out. I'll get him to accompany me to the fort on some pretext or other—the surest way would be to tell him Nan Cushing had met with an accident and was asking for him. That would bring him to the fort—hell-bent."

"I expect maybe it would," assented Downey. "Well, I'll be pullin' out."

Chapter XVII

CORPORAL DOWNEY REVISES THE PLAN

FROM the doorway Doc Milroy watched the uniformed figure ford the creek at the shallows, thread the narrow flat dotted with clumps of stunted willow and pitted with the test pits of the stampedeers, and climb the steep ascent. When it disappeared over the rim, the gambler turned back into the cabin with a long sigh of relief.

On the solid rock of the ridge crest, beyond sight of the cabin, Corporal Downey grinned broadly, and turning sharply upstream, proceeded for some two hundred yards at a right angle to his course. Being careful to leave no trail, he doubled back to the rim at a point where a scrub-choked ravine led downward into the valley of Little Caribou. Working down through the scrub, he divested himself of his pack, snaked across the flat, recrossed the creek at a rapid, and crept to the edge of the tiny clearing,

where he concealed himself in the dense spruce cover at a spot that commanded a view of the shack and the clearing that surrounded it. The door was on the opposite side of the windowless cabin, but Downey reasoned that anyone coming would approach from that side, and he had no wish to be discovered in his rôle of spy.

"Milroy's pretty damn slick, take it all in all," he muttered, as he nested close under the outspread branches of a stunted spruce. "But he overplayed his hand. I've got a hunch that somethin's goin' to happen. Anyway, Milroy's goin' to recache Trevis's gold. Wonder what he thought I was foolin' so long with that watch fer? I expect I'd better check up my facts."

Carefully, methodically, the young corporal reviewed the case in his mind from the moment the inspector had summoned him into his office.

"Milroy's smart, but he's made mistakes—plenty of 'em. First off, he showed that he hated Trevis on account of the girl. That's motive enough fer him to want Trevis put out of the way. But at that, I'll give him credit fer believin' that Trevis actually did kill McTague—he really believes Trevis has got McTague's gold. Then, take the watch. There's where he made three mistakes—first, fer thinkin' that anyone

would take a watch like that an' cache it in their own shack. Second, he stepped in the soft dirt where the floor had be'n pried up when he got the watch, an' then lied to me about only jest steppin' inside the door. An' third, he was damn careful to clean the watch for fear of leavin' his own fingerprints on it. He didn't stop to think that if the man that killed McTague left his prints on the ax an' the rifle, he'd left 'em on the watch, too.

"But the seal ring was the worst mistake of all. How in hell did he figure a man would lose a seal ring? A jackknife, or a glove, or a handkerchief, maybe—but not a seal ring—not Brad Trevis! That's what him an' Zang went back from here to McTague's fer, instead of hittin' straight to Cushing's Fort—to strew that ring around the scene of the crime—the damn fools! But, at that, I've got to hand it to Milroy fer havin' nerve. He had it all figured fer me to go to Cushing's. An' when he seen he'd blundered in tellin' me about that return trip, he never batted an eye—poker face—that's him. An' he never lost his head—his explanation was pretty damn reasonable, an' he didn't take much time to think it up, neither.

"So much fer Milroy—but how about this

here Zang? Trevis knocks hell out of him the second time the same day he banked that gold with Cushing. Zang knows about bankin' the gold, an' he hates Trevis like poison. They both pull out of Cushing's the same day. Ten days later, Zang is back. It's the day Keller busts in with the news about McTague's murder. Keller could of done the killin'. An' so could Zang. He had plenty of time to have done it an' got back to Cushing's. If Keller done it, the job'll be longer. But, I've got a hunch it was Zang. An' I've got another hunch that he ain't usin' only half his name. But he didn't get McTague's dust—at least, not when Milroy was with him. He's had plenty time to locate it since, though. But my hunch says he's trailin' Trevis—fer two reasons. First, if he done the killin', he knows Trevis didn't. Yet Trevis is bankin' gold. Therefore Trevis *did* make a strike. Zang would try to locate Trevis's strike, figurin' that with the evidence framed against him, Trevis'll hang, an' he'll file Trevis's claim. Second, he knows he's got all the time in the world, after Trevis is out of the way, to hunt fer McTague's gold, if he ain't already found it.

“Old Cush is no damn fool. But he sure thinks I'm one. When he put me wise to Milroy I let

on like I didn't get him. Things is due to break pretty quick. Guess I'll jest stick around here. I got grub enough fer four, five days, an' my hunch says Brad Trevis'll show up before that. Looks like Trevis made a strike, all right—but it ain't in them hills. That's flat country muck on them shirts. He was a damn fool fer tryin' to take the fall fer that no-account brother-in-law of his an' skippin' out the way he done. He'll be surprised when he hears how it worked out."

The little clearing, upon the edge of which Downey lay concealed, was littered with the branches and tops that had been lopped from the logs and poles from which Brad Trevis had built his shack close to the bank of the creek. On three sides the dense spruce walled the clearing to within a hundred feet of the cabin. On the remaining side the willow-dotted flat stretched for perhaps a hundred and fifty yards to the ridge that slanted sharply upward to the rim. It was on this slant, at almost the exact point he had ascended it upon leaving the cabin, that Downey caught sight of a man descending the slope. Reaching the bottom, he came hastily across the flat, forded the creek, and hurried straight to the door of the cabin. He was a large man—larger than Brad Trevis. Downey noted

that he was clad in a blue capote, stocking cap, and quill leggings.

Instantly the officer crept from his shelter, and cautiously worming his way among the dead tops and branches, brought up against the wall of the cabin at a point opposite the door, where he had managed, without Milroy's notice, to punch out a narrow space of chinking.

Chapter XVIII

THE PASSING OF DOC MILROY

LOUIS ZANG hurried up the mile-long slope ahead of the caribou herd that was stampeding toward him across the wide tundra. When he stepped behind the upstanding rock fragment from which he had watched Trevis's descent of the slope, the leaders of the herd were already beginning the ascent. A few moments later the animals were boiling and milling about him in a frenzied effort to crowd all at once into the narrow mouth of the rock-walled defile that led to the southern aspect of the range. Hooves clicked on the bare rock floor, and horns rattled. Fairly drooling for a glut of good red meat, Zang refrained from shooting an animal, though the pick of the herd was his at point-blank range. Trevis might hear the shot. Even if he didn't, he could not fail to come upon the carcass the first time he essayed to use the pass. And Louis Zang had no thought of putting Trevis upon his guard. If the man thought anyone had followed him to his strike, he might well

avoid both his own shack and Cushing's Fort and hit straight to Dawson to record.

Cursing and grumbling, he changed from moccasins to pacs, tightened his belt, and struck out through the defile into which the last of the stragglers had disappeared. "Damn his soul! I've got him, now!" he rumbled, viciously. "When the police takes him down to the Yukon, me an' Doc'll sock in our stakes, an' Doc'll go down an' record the pardnership claim. God, the river end of that low cross-ridge where he's got his tent is plumb rotten with gold! Then, one more big play—an' Doc Milroy's through! I'll have Trevis's gold, an' Scotty's, an' Cushing's gal! An' Doc, his bones'll rot in the muck of some beaver wash. He's always skun me at cards. He's smart, all right—but not like me. By God, I'm Louis Zang!" Unconsciously, his voice had risen to the bellow with which he had been wont to challenge all and sundry at Cushing's Fort. But, somehow, in his own ears the sound rang hollow and reverberated from rock wall to rock wall—mockingly. Again he cursed Trevis and hastened on. "I got four-five days, yet, before Doc gits back with the police. I'll slip down to Trevis's shack an' find that dust he packed in that night. No use lettin' Doc in on that. He'd

bank his share in Old Cush's safe, an' I'd never git holt of it there."

Five or six miles down the long rocky ridge Zang stopped and focused his glass on some slowly moving specks that showed in a valley some two miles to the northward. Caribou were feeding there, probably the stragglers of the stampeded herd, tired from their long run. Only for an instant Zang hesitated. Casing his glass, he struck out toward the feeding animals. "I've got the wind on 'em," he muttered, "an' I'm so damn hungry my backbone is sawin' out through my belly. I'll knock one over an' camp on him till mornin'. I kin make Trevis's shack in four, five hours from here easy."

Creeping up through the scrub, Zang selected a fat yearling and fired. The stricken animal leaped forward at the shot, staggered a few steps, and plunged to earth. After glutting himself to repletion on the sweet juicy meat, Zang slept during the remainder of the day and all through the night. Breakfasting at early dawn, he struck out for Little Caribou, and keeping to the ridge when he struck the valley, he arrived at his lookout. One glance, and he drew back sharply and threw himself into the shelter of the bunch of scrub from which he had watched for

so many days. The door of the shack stood open, and smoke rose lazily from the stovepipe! "Who in hell's there?" he growled, savagely. "Doc ain't had time to git back! By God, it's Trevis! It must be! He seen my tracks an' took out. An' he passed me late in the evenin' when I was sleepin' after I'd ett. He'll move this dust, now—damn him! But he'll jest about head into Doc an' the police at Cush's. At that, I'm damn glad he didn't catch me t'other side of them mountains!"

Ten minutes later he hurriedly reached for his glass. A man had stepped through the doorway and paused to adjust his tump strap—a man in the uniform of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. Milroy stepped outside, the two talked for a brief interval, and the officer struck out, forded the stream, crossed the willow flat, and ascended to the opposite ridge. When he disappeared over the rim, the man who had been watching from the doorway turned and reëntered the cabin.

Hastily casing his glass and ignoring his pack, Zang descended the steep slope and crossed the narrow valley on the trail of the policeman. Beyond the rim the trail held to the southward for a quarter of a mile to the crest of the ridge,

where it was lost on the rocky surface. Satisfied, Zang seated himself on a rock and pondered: "He's headin' fer Cush's, all right," he muttered. "I figgered he might double back when he went over the rim. An' I don't need no police prowlin' around where I'm at, whatever. But, how in hell did they git here so quick? An' what's Doc hangin' around here fer, instead of goin' along with the police?"

Thought of the heavily weighted blanket coat with which Trevis had entered the shack roused him. He retraced his steps, descended the ridge, and strode rapidly toward the shack. In the doorway he halted abruptly. Facing him sat Milroy, his gloating eyes on a dozen bulging little sacks that lay on the table before him. The eyes raised instantly, and for a long moment the two glared into each other's faces. Zang was the first to find his voice: "So that's yer game, you goddam double-crosser!" he roared. "Sneakin' in here an' pinchin' off Trevis's dust on me!"

Then the cool voice of Milroy: "Come in, Zang. Don't be a fool."

"I ain't no fool, all right—an' don't you fergit it! That's my dust! I seen him pack it in here."

"But I have it," grinned the gambler. "However, we can argue that later."

"How'd you git here so quick from clean down to Dawson?"

"You weren't expecting us yet?"

"Hell no! Not fer four, five days."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Waitin' fer you to fetch in the police, of course."

"Why not at Cushing's? You knew we'd hit there first."

For a moment the huge man stood nonplussed, glaring. Then, advancing into the room he smote the table with his fist. "I'll wait where I damn please!" he bellowed. "By God, I'm Louis Zang!"

Milroy, noting the red that glowed deep within the baby blue eyes, dropped his hand into his coat pocket where the thick little double Derringer felt good to the touch of his fingers.

"It's plain to see," he sneered, "that you haven't run across Trevis."

"The hell an' I ain't!" cried Zang, with a leer. Then, suddenly, the red glow of anger faded from his eyes. He drew the wash bench toward him, sending the tin basin clattering to the floor, and seating himself, leaned toward the other. "There ain't no sense in us quarrelin'," he began, earnestly. "If me an' you sticks together, we

got the world by the pants, with a downhill pull. If we don't we ain't got nothin'."

The gambler nodded. "Suits me," he answered. "I brought in the policeman, and he's got the evidence right in his pack—McTague's watch that he found right where we cached it, and Trevis's ring, and his fingerprints on the ax and the rifle. He's gone to Cushing's to wait there for Trevis to show up in case you hadn't located him. I've done my part."

Zang nodded. "I know. I seen him pull out. I'd jest got to the lookout a while before. I trailed him till he hit them rocks that runs south from the ridge top. I wanted to make sure he didn't double back along the rim. I don't aim to meet up with no police. Did you tell him my name?"

"Sure I did. He asked all about who went down to McTague's with me, and I told about your being out in the hills trying to locate Trevis for him. I figured that Cush or someone would mention you, anyway. But the name didn't mean anything to him. He's just a young squirt, anyway. I watched his face when I first mentioned it, and he never batted an eye."

"It wouldn't mean nothin' to him, at that," said the other complacently. "I changed it when

I come up here. It use' to be Zangwell down on the Yukon."

"You sure allowed your imagination full sway, didn't you?"

"Huh?" asked Zang, eying the other suspiciously.

"I say, it was damned smart of you to think of changing your name."

"Oh, hell!" exclaimed Zang, deprecatingly. "That ain't so damn smart. A lot of folks change their name. I'm smarter'n that. Wait till you listen."

"You mean you located Trevis's hide-out?"

"Hide-out hell! I located his strike!"

"Strike?" exclaimed Milroy, astonishment in his eyes.

"Yes, strike. The damnedest strike ever made in this country. I'm lettin' you in on it, too. First we'll git to work an split this dust, an' then I'll tell you."

"Split?" said Milroy, suavely. "I don't see where any split comes in. I found this cache—not you." In his pocket his hand gripped the Derringer. But, instead of the loud-bellowed protest he expected, Zang grinned:

"You'd better trail along with me, Doc," he said. "This here's chicken feed."

Milroy regarded the heap of little sacks thoughtfully. "I know McTague must have had a lot more dust than this. You mean you've located Trevis's cache?"

"Cache hell! Where d'you think that gold come from?" Zang asked, abruptly, pointing to the sacks.

"Why, from McTague's cache, of course."

"No, it didn't—not an ounce of it. It come from a claim Trevis is workin'. He ain't got no sluice—not even a shaft. He's shovelin' it right out of the grass roots, an' pan-washin' all of it! He made a strike, all right—jest like he said. *An' he ain't recorded, yet!*"

Milroy laughed. "And you and he being such good friends, he took you out and showed it to you, eh?"

"Showed it to me hell! I trailed him to it. I laid on that pinnacle watchin' this shack till my belly wore a hole in the rock. Then, one rainy night he showed up, jest about dark. He was packin' that gold. I had the glass on him, an' I seen it weightin' down his pockets. Next mornin' I trailed him. All day I follered him over the damnedest mess of hills an' valleys an' ridges an' canyons you ever see, an' at night he come to his claim—which it's out on a wide flat, where no

one that had a damn bit of sense would even look fer gold. But she's there—butter yellor, right in the grass roots. I camped a mile away—an', good God, the mosquitoes! They're so damn thick they clog the air. You got to shove yer way through 'em to walk! I laid in under my tarp all day till the wind come up cold an' put 'em down. Next mornin' he went after a band of caribou that come out of the hills, an' I snuck up an' panned out half an ounce in one pan. Then I hit fer here. What I mean—we'll split half an' half between us, an' then when the police takes him downriver we'll file his claim an' go pardners on both propositions."

Milroy listened, and when the man finished he laughed shortly. "Hell's bells, Zang! Do I look like I was made in a minute? Do you suppose I'd sit here and believe there's any such claim? And if you had run onto it, don't you suppose I know you'd never let me in on it? This gold came from McTague's cache. It's right here on the table. You can see it, and heft it. You're making a cheap play for half of it by offering me a half interest in a claim that's all in your imagination. Nothing doing, Zang. Keep your claim. And I'll keep this chicken feed, as you call it. Muscles is your long suit, Zang—not brains."

"By God, if yourn was dynamite, an' someone touched 'em off, they wouldn't blow yer nose!" growled Zang, in disgust. "Yer right I wouldn't let you in on the strike, onlest I had to. It's like this—you've got to file fer the two of us. I don't dast to show up on the Yukon, an' you dast. An' you won't double-cross me in the filin', neither. When you see the proposition you'll know how big it is. There's plenty fer the two of us—double-cross me an' I'll kill you." The man stared intently into the gambler's face and, leaning closer, lowered his voice. "An' that ain't all," he added, impressively. "But the other'll take more figgerin'. I'm goin' to let you in, half an' half, on Scotty McTague's gold!"

"The hell you are," drawled Milroy, sarcastically. "Well—here's part of it—and I'm not letting you in, half and half, by a damned sight."

Zang laughed, derisively. "Smart as hell, ain't you? But listen at this: Trevis didn't knock Scotty off—an' this ain't Scotty's gold."

"What!"

"Not an ounce of it. Trevis panned that gold out of his claim, an' fetched it here, an' cached it."

"And McTague committed suicide, I sup-

pose,” sneered Milroy. “Tied himself up so he couldn’t move, and then tortured himself for a while with a red-hot rifle barrel, and when he got tired of the sport, bashed his head in with an ax, and left his gold to you in his will, eh? Don’t be a fool. If Trevis didn’t kill McTague, who did?”

“I did.” The man made the admission calmly—convincingly—with no more emotion than he would have stated that he had killed a moose.

Milroy stared into the baby blue eyes as though fascinated. “*You!*” The word jerked out between stiff lips.

“Sure—me—Louis Zang. I’d be’n kind of figgerin’ on it fer a long time. I’d laid in the timber an’ watched him off an’ on—but I couldn’t never locate his cache. Then, when Trevis come in an’ flashed that dust, I seen where then was the time to do it, ’cause everyone would think he done it. That way, I could git Scotty’s gold, an’ git even with Trevis fer what he done to me. So I hit out, an’ snuck up on Scotty, an’ tied him up, an’ burnt him fer a while till he told me where his dust was. After that I didn’t dast to do nothin’ but smash in his head fer him. If the gold had be’n where I could of got holt of it, mebbe I’d of give him a break, an’ took chances

on gittin' away across the line. But the way it is—I couldn't do nothin' else."

Through the crevice where he had dislodged the chinking Corporal Downey saw the face of Milroy grow paper white. When the gambler spoke his voice sounded strained—hard. "Where is McTague's gold, if this isn't part of it?"

"Nan Cushing's got it," said Zang. "He's banked it with her fer years. Said he's always be'n afraid someone would try to knock him off. Then he laffed! Yes, sir—suckin' in the smoke of his own burnin' flesh, he laffed. Damn him! He died laughin'—like the joke was on me!"

For a long time Milroy sat silent, staring straight ahead. Then he nodded slowly, and the words fell from his lips in a tone so low that, beyond the wall, Corporal Downey strained his ears to catch them. "Yes," said the gambler, "with those fingerprints in Corporal Downey's pack, it looks like the joke's on you."

"What d'you mean—on me?" cried the other, angrily. "You talk like a damn fool! Them finger tracks'll fit Trevis as good as they will me! If me an' you sticks together, the joke's on McTague. I got it all doped out. Nan Cushing's got McTague's gold cached—an' we're goin' to git it. She got sore as hell at me fer bustin' that dog's

back, an' she ain't got over it. But she ain't sore at you. When yer policeman takes Trevis back downriver, you'll have the gal all to yerself. Then, if yer as slick with women as you be with cards, it won't be no hell of a job to haul off an' marry her. Then we'll split McTague's gold between us. You're gittin' the long end, at that—half of this here dust, half of the gold in Trevis's gravel, half of McTague's gold, an' the gal throw'd in to boot. At that, if you don't want her, I'll take her off'n yer hands. By God, I kin use her! I'll learn her to laff—damn her!"

Milroy was on his feet staring wide-eyed into the face of the speaker. Zang arose, also, and stretched a huge hand across the table. "Put 'er there!" he boomed, "pardners is pardners—the hull ways through."

Between thin, tensed lips Doc Milroy's voice rang like chilled steel: "Partners! You go to hell, Zang! You yellow bastard! After what you've told me I wouldn't be a partner of yours in a white chip!"

Red leaped to the surface in the eyes of Louis Zang. Milroy's hand gripped the butt of the Derringer, and he jerked frantically to draw as the huge figure lunged upon him. But the gun hung in the pocket, and the next instant he

crashed backward upon the floor, with Zang on top of him.

Revolver in hand, Corporal Downey dashed around the shack. As he leaped through the doorway a shot roared in the little room, and a moment later he was standing over Zang who, Derringer in hand, was crouching upon the dead body of Milroy.

"Drop that gun!" Zang was aware that the muzzle of a service revolver was pressing against his skull, and that the cold hard eyes of a man in uniform were boring into his own. He complied on the instant. "Up with your hands! Stand up! Back into that corner!" The short clipped commands rang sharp. The cocked service revolver was still on him, and Zang realized that at the slightest squeeze of the trigger he would join Milroy.

When the man had complied, Downey slipped the Derringer into his pocket and stood regarding his prisoner with level gaze.

Chapter XIX

OLD CUSH GIVES A TIP

BRAD TREVIS bungled his hunt. Game had been scarce beyond the mountains, and with the yellow gold in his gravel he begrudged the time necessary to go into the hills after moose. He was hungry for fresh meat. So, on the morning that Louis Zang lay watching through his glass, when he stepped from his tent and saw the herd of caribou defiling from the mountains to spread fanlike over the tundra, he picked up his rifle, forded the sluggish river, and circled to the base of the range.

Creeping from rock fragment to rock fragment, from clump to clump of the stunted spruce that edged the tundra, he succeeded in reaching the creek bed through which the animals had descended from the hills. The main herd was well out in the open, but two hundred yards away a group was feeding closer in to the foot of the range. Selecting a young animal, he fired—and missed. Instantly the whole herd was in

confusion. Startled animals plunged in all directions. Groups formed, circled as if seeking a leader, and dispersed again. Trevis pumped another cartridge into his barrel and waited. To regain the hills the herd would pass within a few feet of him. They were heading for him now, under the leadership of an old bull. Suddenly the leader paused, sniffed the air and whirled. The next instant he was off with the whole herd at his heels, making for the pass at the summit of the long slope by means of which he himself had gained access to the flats.

Cursing his luck, Trevis fired, and fired again—long shots—running shots—and fruitless. Reaching camp, he cleaned his rifle, filled his pan, and walked with it to the river. Scooping up water, he clawed off the top gravel, when suddenly his eyes became fixed upon certain bright yellow specks that dappled the coarse gravel of his waste dump. Laying aside the pan, he regarded the glittering specks with drawn brows. "How in hell did that dust get there?" he muttered. "I sure haven't spilled any gold—and that stuff's been washed!"

Leaping to his feet, he dashed to the tent, snatched up his rifle, and stepping into the open, swept the horizon with narrowed eyes. "I wish

to hell I had a glass!" he growled. "Someone's been here!" Pausing only to fill his pockets with bannocks, he struck out upriver. "It's ten to one he came through the hills by way of the canyon. Either followed me in day before yesterday, or blundered onto the pass by accident. There's only one other way that I know, and he could never have crossed the flat without disturbing the caribou."

Vaulting the broader beaver wash by means of his pole, he followed its bank, and a few yards back from the river he found where the intruder had crossed. There was a fresh though indistinct moccasin track in the muck, and the moss and grass were sprinkled with muddy water that had not yet dried. "He didn't waste any time hitting out when he discovered what that gravel showed," he muttered. "He wore moccasins—but a Siwash wouldn't monkey with gold."

Farther on, within the screening willows that fringed the river banks, he picked up the track again where the man had leaped a lesser wash. The track was plain this time, showing the whole contour of the foot. He fitted his pack into the pattern. "A big man," he mused, and then, aloud, "Zang!" For long moments he stood there, thinking. "What in the devil is he hitting out

for?" he speculated. "He didn't drive in his stakes—he can't expect to record the claim. Why in hell he didn't lie in the willows and pot me is more than I know. He could have sunk me in one of these washes and no one could ever have proved it." He grinned to himself. "Old Cush would have figured it out—but if there had been an investigation all they'd have got out of him would have been 'I couldn't say'."

Hastening on, he picked up, here and there, other tracks where the man, in his haste, had carelessly stepped into soft muck. At the foot of the slope he found that the man had halted for a time, evidently to scan his back trail with a glass. Higher up, where the ground was harder, he was able to pick up a faint impression or two—then the impressions vanished—smothered beneath the hoofprints of the caribou herd. "Started up ahead of 'em," he reasoned. "Beat 'em to the canyon, too—if they'd seen him on this bald slope it would have turned 'em. He's four or five hours ahead of me. It's all rocks beyond the summit, and I can't trail him—but it's a good guess that he's hitting for Cushing's. Anyhow, that's where I'm heading—and if he's there——" Trevis did not voice just what would happen should he come upon Zang at Cushing's.

He did not know what he would do. The thing would work itself out. He knew he would do something—and that that something would be conclusive.

Beyond the canyon he swung sharply to the southeastward, avoiding the trail to Little Caribou. It was a course that foreshortened the trail to Cushing's and obviated the necessity of climbing many ridges by skirting the sources of innumerable draws and small valleys.

It was nearly dark when he arrived at the fort to find Old Cush alone in the barroom. "Where's Zang?" he asked, abruptly.

Cush tore the corner from a plug of tobacco, mouthed the quid with evident relish, set out the bottle and glasses, and answered: "I couldn't say."

"Hasn't he been here to-day?"

"Not that I seen."

Trevis grinned. "I guess you'd have seen him, if he'd been around."

"Chances is."

Trevis tossed off his liquor and refilled his glass. "Where's Nan?" he asked.

"Siwashin'. Ain't seen her fer a month. Some Injuns is dyin' off to hell an' gone—an' she's helpin' 'em."

"She's a great girl," said Trevis, his eyes on the outer dusk.

"Fer the Siwashes," grunted Cushing. "My books is in a hell of a shape."

"Zang located my strike," said Trevis, after a few moments of silence. "He panned out at least one pan this morning while I was hunting. I figured he'd hit for here. I don't savvy his game. He can't jump the claim—he didn't stake it, so he can't record it."

"Figgered he had plenty of time."

"It's a wonder he didn't lay fer me in the willows and pot me when I came back to camp."

"Didn't figger he had to."

Trevis regarded the older man with puckered brows. "What in the devil are you driving at, Cush? I don't see how Zang could figure he had plenty of time to jump my claim unless he did knock me off."

"Figgers the law'll save him the resk. You ain't seen no one out in the hills?"

"No. Who do you mean?"

"Meanin' a police from down on the Yukon. He's up here huntin' the man that murdered old Scotty McTague."

"Haven't seen him," answered Trevis, indif-

ferently. "Who's Scotty McTague? And why should anyone murder him?"

"McTague was a prospector, an' someone prob'ly knocked him off fer his dust."

"Did he have much dust?"

"I couldn't say. But if he didn't, he should ort to had. He had what was reckoned the best claim in the country, onlest mebbe Zang's, an' he worked it stidy an' never put out an ounce he didn't have to."

"Did the murderer get the gold?"

"I couldn't say. But the facts is—that there police is up here huntin' you."

"Me!"

"Yeah, you. He kind of figgers mebbe you done it. Everyone knows you was broke, an' then all to onct banked a quite a considerable of dust. An' they figger there ain't no claim around here that would pay out that big. They know yourn don't—on Little Caribou—they've panned it."

Trevis laughed. "They panned the wrong claim. I told you that. The thing for us to do is to slip back to my strike and sock in our stakes and record the claims before Zang has a chance to beat us to it."

Old Cush shook his head. "'Twouldn't do no mortal good. Don't you see Zang's game? He

didn't knock you off when he located yer claim 'cause he figgered the law would. He's slipped back to git the police an' fetch him over to your strike. They'd be waitin' fer you agin' we got there."

"Let 'em be there! I'm not afraid of the law! Hell, man! I didn't kill this McTague! I never even heard of him."

"Kin you prove it?"

"I don't have to prove it. I can prove where I got my gold—the claim will show that. It would be up to them to prove that I did kill him."

"Um-hum. They'd prove it, too."

"Prove it!" cried Trevis aghast. "What the devil do you mean? You don't believe I killed McTague. And I'll bet Nan don't."

"She don't know nothin' about it. Me, if I did believe it, I wouldn't be handin' you no tip, would I? Not by a damned sight. I'd set back an' let natur' take her course. But it ain't what I think, it's what the police finds that counts. An' I'm bettin' he'll find a plenty."

"What do you mean?"

"Meanin' yer framed."

"Framed! You mean Zang framed me? Hell, that big fourflusher hasn't got brains enough to frame a louse!"

"Mebbe not," admitted Cushing, dryly. "But he might borrow brains. Jest look around a bit. Ain't there nothin', what you might say, fixtures missin'."

Trevis glanced in perplexity about the room. Suddenly he faced Cushing with a grin. "You mean Doc Milroy?"

The older man stared fixedly at the card tables. "Well, now, sence you mentioned it, he ain't here, is he?"

"But why should Doc Milroy want to frame me?"

"I couldn't say. Onlest, mebbe, he might figger how Nan wouldn't be needin' two husban's."

Trevis regarded the other with a smile. "So that's the game, is it? To hell with 'em! I'm not afraid of 'em! They can't frame me!"

Old Cush spat with precision upon a playing card that lay face upward on the floor. "They've done so, son," he said. "They hung Christ on less than what they've got on you."

"Crucified, you mean," corrected Trevis, still smiling.

"What's the difference?" answered Cushing, coldly. "If you take my advice you'll git a-goin'. You'll go fast—an' go a long time. Alasky's west."

"You mean skip out? Skip out and leave Zang and Milroy to divide my strike between 'em! Not by a damned sight! Where is this policeman?"

"Well, if he ain't down to yer shack, layin' fer you, he's prob'ly over to yer strike, or will be agin' Zang has time to fetch him there."

"I'll swing down by the shack in the morning and then hit out to the strike," said Trevis. "It'll take more than Zang and Milroy to pull the wool over the eyes of the Mounted."

"The wool pullin's done. I seen this here specimen—talked to him. He ain't got hair enough on his chin to have much experience. An' I figger he's got plenty room to rent above the eyes. Better listen to me, son. You ain't got a show. If you git goin' now, you could prob'ly git clean out of the country. I kin dig up a Siwash fer a guide that's pretty good at fergittin' where he's be'n an' what he's seen."

"Not by a damned sight! I've made a strike out there that may run into millions."

"Yeah," answered Old Cush, dryly. "That had ort to be a comfort to a man when he was jerkin' around on the down end of a tight one. You got aroun' 'leven thousan' in dust, right here. If them pacs you're wearin' was mine, they'd be kickin' up Alaska dust 'fore midnight."

"I'll hit out for the shack in the morning," said Trevis, stubbornly. "It isn't only the gold, Cush. It's the principle of the thing. I'll be damned if I'll run!"

"Well," said Cushing, after a pause, "I've said my say. Now, I'll jest r'ar back an' look on. Some folks has got muscle, like this here, now, Zang; an' some has got brains, like, mebbe, Milroy; an' some has got guts—that's you. A man kind of wonders what's goin' to happen when muscles an' brains an' guts tangles up. There's blankets in the storeroom. You better catch you some sleep."

Chapter XX

BRAD TREVIS HITS OUT FOR HIS SHACK

FOR a long time that night Brad Trevis lay between the blankets of his improvised bunk behind the counter of Cushing's trading room, thinking. Where was Nan Cushing? If Old Cush hadn't seen her for a month, she must have left the fort soon after she had fled from him with that little choking cry and disappeared in the timber; leaving him standing alone in the shadows. Why had she gone? Were there really some Siwashes dying somewhere in the hills? Or had the girl invented the dying Siwashes as an excuse to get away from the fort—away from the place that had so recently come to hold association with—him? For, she *had* cared. She had loved him. Vividly he recollected the fear in her eyes as she tried to persuade him to slip back into the bush without meeting Louis Zang. And after it was all over, she had gone to the place where she knew he would come to look for her—the

clearing his own ax had made in the forest, where she had stopped that day and watched his clumsy efforts at wood chopping. He remembered the light that had glowed in her eyes when he told her he loved her, and the hurried, half-hysterical flow of words with which she had repeated the story Britton had brought from the Yukon, and her swift assurance that she knew it was a lie—that she didn't believe a word of it. And, then—the sudden pallor of her cheeks, the wide-eyed incredulity with which she had received his confirmation of the tale—and the low cry of poignant pain with which she had turned and dashed into the bush. He recollected the emptiness, the sickening feeling of futility that had gripped him as he stood alone there in the shadows. And the almost irresistible impulse to run after her, to overtake her and, with his lips close to her ear, to tell her the *whole* truth. But no! His thoughts switched to his sister—of her marriage, against his advice, to the dashing ne'er-do-well who had turned out to be such a rotter. "Poor Madge," he muttered into his blankets, "she's only got me. It would kill her to find out he had pulled a stunt like that. The tragedy of it is, she loves him. Maybe I am a fool. It didn't seem to matter so much, then. I couldn't see Madge suffer."

Then at thought of his scapegrace brother-in-law, slinking in craven terror into Stoel's back room, he muttered fiercely: "By God, he better run straight or I'll kill him myself! It's ruined my life. He promised—and, if he makes good . . . it's better mine than hers."

But where was Nan Cushing? He wondered that Old Cush did not seem to be particularly worried over her long absence. Cush's worry seemed to be all for himself and the fact that Zang and Milroy had framed him for the murder of a man he had never even heard of. That was peculiar, for Cush seemed a man of vast understanding. The frame-up wasn't worrying Trevis in the least. How in the devil could they hope to prove a murder on him that he had not committed? It seemed preposterous on the face of it. What evidence could they manufacture? True, there was the seal ring he thought he had left on the nail over his wash dish. He had been surprised and a trifle annoyed at finding it missing on the occasion of his last visit to his shack, but concluded that some passing prospector had stolen it. He knew the unsavory reputation of the country. Zang and Milroy might have visited the shack and then carried the ring down and planted it at McTague's. But any fool would

know that a murderer wouldn't strew monogrammed seal rings about the scene of his crime. Why, then, should Old Cush seem so worried? Surely the old man believed that he could prove where he had mined his gold. Funny, thought Trevis, that he had never even considered Doc Milroy as a rival for the hand of Nan Cushing. He grinned to himself. "Old Cush gave Milroy credit for brains—but he sure overplayed his hand, this time. The way things are, if he had just sat tight, she might have married him. But when she finds out he tried to frame a man for murder—good night! It's worse than Zang's breaking the back of that dog! Worse, even, than jumping out through a window and leaving a husband gunning for a man in the dark."

Brad Trevis took the trail early the following morning. He had no definite plan. If Zang had not gone to Cushing's, he must have hit for the shack on Little Caribou to inform Milroy and the policeman that he had located Trevis's strike. But—would he tell the policeman about the discovery of the strike? On the face of it, that would account for the gold that he was supposed to have taken from McTague's cache. Or was the case they had framed against him so strong that the two could afford to ignore the gold? If so,

Trevis had visions of Zang and Milroy gloating over the gold they would scoop out of his gravel after the policeman had taken him hack to Dawson. He would soon know. He should reach the shack before noon. If he found it empty he could reach the strike on the willow flat by noon of the following day. Then would come the show-down.

There was no trail in the nature of a traveled path between Cushing's Fort and Little Caribou. Only at certain places—the ascent and descent of steep ridges—did Trevis ever cover the same ground twice. The rocky, sparsely timbered terrain made the going as good one place as another.

As he topped the last ridge and headed for the rim he halted suddenly and stared at a track that showed plainly at a point where the flat rock of the ridge crest gave place to a shallow topsoil. It was the track of a huge pac.

"Zang's track!" he exclaimed, aloud. "*But what in hell was Zang doing on this side of the ridge?*" Instantly his brain was in a whirl, and he felt a trifle sick at his stomach. The sun beat down hot on the bare rock and he turned aside into the shade of a clump of stunted spruce. He must think. Throwing himself to the ground, he

mopped the sweat from his face and neck with his handkerchief. He saw it all now—the whole sordid conspiracy. And Old Cush was in with the rest! There would be no policeman at the shack. There was no policeman in the hill country. The murder of Scotty McTague and Cushing's story of the frame-up were all part of a deep-laid scheme to get rid of him—so the conspirators could divide up his gold. It was plain as day—now. They were all tarred with the same brush. The moment Zang located Trevis's real strike he hit for Cushing's and put the old man wise—then hit out for the shack to notify Milroy, who was doubtless awaiting him there. Else how could Zang's tracks be on this side of the Little Caribou valley and heading directly from Cushing's to the shack? That would explain the old man's casual statement that he hadn't seen Nan for a month. The girl was doubtless in her own room—merely keeping out of sight while Cush tried to persuade him to hit out for Alaska. That also explained Cush's evident deep concern over the framed murder. "He figured I had confidence in his judgment," muttered the man. "And I had. I liked him. But, even so, I couldn't get excited over a murder I didn't commit. At that, I'll give Old Cush credit for trying to make me skip the

country—I'll bet the others were for knocking me off. I've got to watch my step from here," he reasoned. "I've got my rifle, but there are two of them, and the chances are they're both armed. When they find that Cush's bluff didn't work, it wouldn't take much of a prophet to figure what they'll try to do to me." He wondered dully whether Nan was in on it. "No, by God!" he cried, aloud. "She hates and despises me—but she'd never stand for that!"

As he lay there in the shade, trying to formulate some plan of action, his mind reverted bitterly to Old Cush. "I figured he was square. The damned old crook—after I'd offered to let him and Nan in on the strike, too! I'll settle with him, later. First, I've got to take care of these two damned wolves in the shack."

Suddenly he drew back and, flattening himself against the ground, wriggled into a position that commanded his back trail. Someone was coming and coming fast. He could hear the rapid click of hobbled pacs on the bare rock surface of the ridge crest. Nan Cushing burst into view, hurriedly threading her way between the stunted trees that found precarious rooting among the rock crevices. Lips parted, and face flushed with exertion, she passed at a rapid pace and disappeared

in the direction of the shack. When she was out of sight, Trevis leaped to his feet and followed. At the valley's edge he halted and peered cautiously over the rim. The girl had gained the bottom and was swiftly crossing the willow flat. He saw her splash through the shallows, dash across the clearing, and disappear through the open doorway of the shack.

For what seemed a long, long time Trevis stood staring down into the little valley. "Nan, too," he murmured, and gradually he became conscious of a vast sense of loss. "Old Cush sent her to warn them that I was on my way here. And if I hadn't shoved right along, she'd have passed me before this."

Swiftly he descended into the valley, and slipping from willow clump to willow clump, forded the river and took up his position in the thick scrub at the edge of the clearing. Minutes passed. Above the sound of the creek splashing noisily over the stones of the shallows, he caught snatches of loud talking. He recognized the voice of Louis Zang, probably quarreling with Milroy over the failure of Cushing's bluff. He considered maneuvering to a position that would command the open door, but decided against it.

Chapter XXI

NAN CUSHING RETURNS FROM THE HILLS

BACK from the far hills, Nan Cushing strode into her father's barroom with blood in her eyes. "I'm going to bust a few heads around here!" she exclaimed, bringing her rifle butt to the floor with a bang.

"Yeah?" Old Cush glanced up, but continued to wipe perfunctorily at a glass.

"Yes—just as soon as I find out who's peddling hooch to those Indians! I smashed a gallon jug that Tom Little Boy had. And you'll have to get to work and straighten the magazine of my rifle where I flattened it over his head!"

"Does need straightenin'," admitted Cush, eying the battered tube.

"And that isn't all that needs straightening around here! Who sold that hooch?"

"Not me. I never sell to Siwashes."

"Who did?"

"I couldn't say."

"You couldn't say!" cried the girl, scornfully. "To hear you talk, anyone would think you didn't know anything about anything!"

"Yeah?"

"Yes—and you know as well as I do it's a dirty, contemptible trick to sell hooch to those Indians when their families haven't got enough to eat half the time!"

"Tain't right, at that," agreed Cush.

"You admit it isn't right, and yet you won't tell me who is doing it."

"I ain't no policeman; neither I ain't no newspaper. I mind my own business. I've sort of noticed that '*I couldn't say*' gits a man further than '*It was him.*'"

"Well, you bet, if I find out who's selling that hooch, he won't sell any more—to the Indians or anyone else! I mind my own business, too. And I've made it part of my business to see that the Indians get a square deal."

"I'll kind of pass the word an' have it put a stop to."

"You better, or you're going to be shy a customer or two."

"Some of 'em wouldn't be no great loss, at that. By the way, they's a police in the hills, right now."

"A policeman! On White River? What does he want?"

"Brad Trevis."

"Brad Trevis!" Old Cush noted that the girl's color changed ever so slightly. After a long moment of silence she shrugged with an air of studied indifference. "I hope he has good luck," she said, in a voice that sounded toneless and flat.

"What makes you say that?" asked Cush, leaning both elbows on the bar. "I thought you an' him hit it off pretty good."

"I hate him!" cried the girl vehemently. "You heard what he did down on the Yukon."

"Yeah," replied Old Cush, dryly. "But take me, now, I've sort of got in the habit of judgin' a man by eye, ruther than by ear. First place, I don't believe a damn word of it. Trevis, he's got guts. He wouldn't of jumped through no winder fer no husban'. He'd of come on out through the door, an' if the husban' was in the road, he'd of be'n out of luck—that's all. An' if he come gunnin' fer Brad, afterwards, his luck would of gone from bad to worst. Hell's fire, Nan! Where's yer common sense? I know an' you know that Brad Trevis wouldn't of skipped out fer no man! He'd stayed an' shot it out with all the husban's on the Yukon! He's a man! An' that's

why I jest set Britton's story down fer a damn lie."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl, eying her father with outraged eyes.

"Mean! What d'you think I mean? I can't talk it no plainer'n what I done, kin I?"

"I mean—what was Brad Trevis doing in the other man's cabin, in the first place?"

Old Cush regarded the girl for a moment with a puzzled frown. "Oh," he said, shifting his quid thoughtfully, as the light of understanding broke in on him, "you mean—that? Well—I reckon that's his business. I couldn't say."

The girl turned angrily away, but halted half-way to the door at her father's words. "But that ain't neither here nor there. That ain't what he's wanted fer, anyways."

"What else has he done?" she asked, scornfully.

"Well—it looks like someone's up an' murdered old Scotty McTague fer his dust."

"Scotty McTague! For his dust!" The girl was again before the bar, staring wide-eyed into her father's eyes.

"Yeah. An' Trevis, you'll recollect, was broke, an' then showed up all to onct with plenty of dust. Then Bill Keller, he found Scotty dead in

his shack. Claims he was all tied up an' wound in a gill net with his head stove in, an' his face an' feet burnt, like he'd be'n tormented to make him tell where his dust was cached. Zang and Milroy, they went down an' investigated, an' they comes to the conclusion that Trevis prob'ly done it. So Zang, he puts in the time trailin' Trevis, while Doc goes down to the Yukon an' fetches in a police."

"Down to the Yukon and back! How long ago was it that poor old Scotty was killed?"

"I couldn't say. It's goin' on three weeks ago that Bill Keller come in with the news."

"The fools!" cried the girl, vehemently. "Anyone with a grain of sense ought to know that Brad Trevis never murdered anyone for his dust!"

"Well," drawled Cush, "it looks like they got a pretty strong case agin him—what with him showin' up with a lot of gold all to onct. Milroy, he really believes Trevis done it."

The girl shot her father a keen glance. "I'll bet Louis Zang did it! He did; didn't he?"

"I couldn't say."

"Anyway, whoever did it never got an ounce of poor old Scotty's dust!"

Old Cush stared at the girl in genuine surprise.

"What's that? What d'you mean—never got none of his dust?"

"I mean just what I said. That whoever killed Scotty McTague never got an ounce of dust, except maybe the few ounces he'd taken out since he was here last."

"Scotty never banked his dust with me," answered Cush. "Some of the boys does—but not Scotty. He cached his'n."

"Yes," answered the girl. "He cached it not more than twenty steps from where you're standing. He cached it with me. That big wooden chest in my room is half full of Scotty's gold."

"What!"

The man's astonishment was so obvious that the girl smiled. "He was a queer one. He didn't trust any man—not even you. But for some reason he did trust me. He used to keep it cached somewhere out in the hills, but a few years ago he asked me to keep it for him. He said he was afraid someone would murder him for it, and if they did he wanted to make sure they never got an ounce for their pains. He chuckled about it as though it were a great joke. I told him it would be safer in your big iron safe, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said that once, long ago, a man he knew better than he knows you beat

him out of all he had, and that since then he has trusted no man. Poor old man, he was so insistent that I agreed to keep his dust for him, and he made out a paper—a sort of will, I suppose—leaving the dust all to me in case anything happened to him. Then he packed in the dust from his cache, and ever since then he's brought in his dust and we've put it in the chest. He never would even take slips for it—was afraid someone would see us weighing it."

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Old Cush. "I thought I know'd somethin' about this country—an' I don't even know what's goin' on in my own house!"

"He made me promise I'd never tell while he was alive," explained the girl.

Cush nodded and stood regarding her with puckered brows. "You say he kind of laffed, like it would be a good joke on them that killed him?"

"Yes, it gave me the creeps—to hear a man laughing over his own murder. Why did you ask that?"

"Well," replied the old man, thoughtfully, "accordin' to what they said—Bill Keller an' Zang an' Milroy—whoever killed Scotty didn't do it quick. They burnt him a while with a hot rifle bar'l. Now a joke ain't worth a damn onlest

the one that plays it sees it work out. I figger that if Scotty's be'n mullin' that joke around in his head all them years, he ain't goin' to miss the springin' it when the time comes. The chances is, whoever killed him knows you've got the gold. If they're ornery enough to kill a man fer gold, they wouldn't stop at a woman. You got to watch yer step from now on, till I kin git it spread around that we moved it into the safe. You stick around clost to the post—no matter if half the Siwashes in the hills dies. Gi' me that rifle an' I'll git to work on it. Next time you club anyone, turn the rifle over an' use the top side of the bar'l. If you bend that over their head it means somethin'."

"I'd like to bend it double over Louis Zang's head!" cried the girl. "He murdered Scotty McTague, and he's trying to put it off onto Brad Trevis. But he won't get away with it!"

"I don't know," said Old Cush, somberly. "They might, at that."

"What's Doc Milroy throwing in with Zang for?" asked the girl, angrily.

"Well, you see, Milroy, he believes Trevis done the killin'. An' neither him nor Zang, nor no one else wants the police nosin' around the hills indefinite, so they figgered to help the police

out by makin' the case so plain that all he'd have to do is to grab off Trevis an' take him down to the Yukon. From what they told me they've got evidence enough framed up on Trevis to hang him three, four times."

"Have you seen this policeman—talked to him?"

"Yeah. Milroy fetched him here when they come upriver. He's more comfortin' to see than talk to. His brains don't seem to be crowdin' his hair roots none."

"Did you tell him that Zang and Milroy had framed Trevis?"

"Who, me? Not by a damn sight, darter. You ought to know by this time that I don't never help nor neither hinder the police."

"And you'd stand there and see an innocent man hanged rather than tell who the guilty man is?" cried the girl, angrily.

"They ain't no one be'n hung, yet," answered Cush, dryly. "An' besides, I couldn't of told who killed Scotty. I never jump at no conclusions. I couldn't say who done it."

"Where's Brad Trevis now?" the girl asked, suddenly.

"I couldn't say. He might be down to his shack on Little Caribou. He might be to his

strike, wherever that is. An' he might be headin' fer the Yukon with the police. He came in here, an' I give him a tip that the police was here huntin' him. Knowin' what them two claimed they had framed on him, I give him the best advice I could think of. I told him to hit out an' keep a-goin'. He's got quite a heft of dust in the safe, and he could of took it, an' the chances is he could of got plumb away in Alasky. But he wouldn't do it. He claimed he never even heard tell of Scotty McTague, let alone killed him, an' he wouldn't skip out fer no one."

"Where did he go from here?"

"He claimed he was headin' fer his shack."

"How long ago?"

"Hour, mebbby—hour an' a half. I heard him pull out. I jest got up. Hey! You wait an' eat—an' you jest off the trail! An' besides—what d'I tell you about stickin' around the——" But Old Cush was shouting at the empty room. "What in hell's girls comin' to that don't mind no better'n what she does?" he grumbled, and busied himself arranging the bottles and glasses on the back bar.

Chapter XXII

ZANG TURNS THE TABLES

NAN CUSHING burst into the shack on Little Caribou and halted abruptly just inside the doorway to stare wide-eyed from the trim figure of the officer in the uniform of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, who was comfortably seated on a rude bench with a service revolver in his hand, to Louis Zang, who stood in a corner near the bunk with his hands elevated to the ceiling. On a pole table, between the two, little sacks of gold were piled. "Where's Brad Trevis?" demanded the girl, and paused abruptly to stare at the body of Doc Milroy, sprawled on the floor beyond the table.

Corporal Downey smiled. "I don't know, miss. I be'n hopin' he'd show up."

"He never killed Scotty McTague!" cried the girl. "He never killed anyone! Oh, I know he's a cad and a rotter and all that—but he's no murderer! And I can prove it!"

The girl thought the officer's smile widened

just a trifle as he jerked a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket and tossed them onto the table. He indicated his prisoner with a foreward thrust of his gun barrel. "Louis Zangwell is a powerful man, miss. An' he's desperate as he is powerful. He's broke away from the police twice, already."

An inarticulate throat sound broke from between Zang's lips, and both saw that the eyes that glared into Downey's glowed red, deep down, as the elevated hands clenched into huge fists, and a great vein stood out in his forehead like a whip cord. "Oh, I knew you, Zangwell, the minute you stepped into the clearing. I'd suspected who you were when your friend Milroy referred to you as Zang. You notice I didn't say your 'pardner,' Zang. He was a better man than you are. There were things he wouldn't stand for. I'm sorry I wasn't quick enough to save him." Downey pointed to the handcuffs and turned to the girl. "I've be'n studyin' how to get them bracelets on him, Miss. I ain't takin' no chances. If you could jest slip 'em on while I keep him covered——"

"Did he kill Doc Milroy?" interrupted the girl, staring at the man in horror.

"He sure did. I laid outside watchin' an'

listenin' to what they said, an' when he made a dive for Doc, I got here as quick as I could, but I was too late. He done it with Doc's own gun—before he could draw. He's fast, Zangwell is—fast an' powerful. It takes a mighty good man to best him."

"I'd love to put them on him!" said the girl, as with narrowed eyes she lifted the handcuffs from the table. "And I'll bet you'll find that he murdered poor old Scotty McTague, too!"

"I know that, already," answered Downey. "An' there's a couple of more murders. A white man down in Alberta, an' a Siwash at Hootalinqua——"

"It's a lie!" roared Zang. "You can't prove it! You can't prove nothin'."

Downey grinned. "Not even Milroy, I suppose."

"I had a right to kill him! He draw'd a gun on me!"

"How about McTague? Did he draw a gun, too?"

"I never killed McTague! Brad Trevis done it! Didn't you find his ring—an' Scotty's watch?"

"Yump—right where you an' Milroy planted 'em. You're out of luck this time, Zangwell. There are fingerprints all over McTague's ax

and his rifle that will tighten the rope around your neck."

"Finger tracks—hell!" bellowed Zang, scornfully. "You talk like a damn fool—like Milroy! You can't bluff me! One man's hands is the same as another's—barrin' size. An' Trevis, he's damn near as big as I be."

"There's a sayin'," grinned Corporal Downey, "that what a man don't know don't hurt him. But I ain't so sure. Lower your arms, now. Keep 'em stretched out full length in front of you—hands together."

Before Downey could prevent her, Nan Cushing stepped directly in front of him to go around the table. With a bellow Zang leaped forward and Corporal Downey crashed backward to the floor with the girl, the gold sacks, the table, and Zang on top of him. The next instant the gun was wrenched from his hand and Zang's thick fingers jerked Milroy's Derringer from his pocket and hurled it out the door.

Keeping Downey covered with his own gun, the man jerked the girl to her feet. "Set that table up," he ordered, "an' pile them sacks back onto it. By God, you'll know who's boss from now on! You would tell me I ain't as good as the dog you shot when I busted his back,

would you? An' you would laugh when I git beat up? Twict you done that—but, by God, from now on the laughin'll be t'other way around! Stand back away from that door! Yer both expectin' Trevis to show up. The quicker the better—an' I don't want no one in the road when I start in smokin' him up! I'll learn the damn lousy skunk to sneak up an' knock hell out of me when I ain't lookin'! I'll blow his liver clean out through his backbone!" The man paused and swung the gun on Downey. "Git up off'n the floor, an' move over there by Milroy. I'm runnin' this show from now on. By God, I'm Louis Zang! You think you're a damn smart policeman—you, an' yer damn finger tracks! But who's smart now! I took Milroy's gun away from him, an' I've took yourn—an' if you don't watch yer step you'll be goin' the same road he went. I'm Louis Zang! An' to hell with you an' yer finger tracks, an' Old Cush, an' Trevis, an' Milroy! To hell with the whole damn world! I'm Louis Zang!" In a perfect frenzy the man hurled his words into the teeth of the helpless prisoners. It was as though the sudden turning of the tables had made him drunk with power, and throwing all caution to the winds, he raved like a madman. "You pegged me fer Louis Zangwell, an' they've

got the goods on me down in Alberta—an' fer the Siwash, too! But what the hell do I care? There's no damn police kin hold me! You've had me three times—an' three times I've got away! I'm too hot fer 'em to handle! I'm a bad man, an' by God I'm on my prowl! You can't hang a man but onct—an' you've got to ketch him before you kin hang him. An' you got to hold him after you ketch him! I killed the scow man in Alberta, an' the Siwash down to Hootalinqua! I killed Scotty McTague! An' I killed Doc Milroy! An' I'm a-goin' to wind up by killin' Brad Trevis, an' Old Cush, an' a couple more Siwashes! That's what I think of yer damn police—I'm tellin' you right to yer face what I done an' what I'm a-goin' to do—an' to hell with you! Milroy was a fool! If he'd played the game my way, we'd of be'n settin' pretty—with Trevis' strike where you kin shovel gold right out of the grass roots—an' we'd of split Scotty McTague's gold—an' he'd of had you fer his woman!" He leered at the shrinking girl and laughed harshly. "But now I'm the only one that 's settin' pretty. I've wanted you myself—but since I killed that dog, I know'd I couldn't git you—so I turned you over to Doc. But yer my woman now! You an' Scotty McTague's gold—an' all the gold in Old

Cush's safe! When Trevis shows up I'll blast him to hell, an' then me an' you'll hit fer the fort, an' I'll give Old Cush the same dost. Then with his gold an' McTague's we'll hit out, we'll travel fast—an' travel far——”

A laugh interrupted the words—a shrill, hysterical laugh that held nothing of mirth as it issued from between scorn-curled lips as the girl stared in horror-stricken fascination into the gloating face, with its eyes that burned red deep down. “Your woman!” Never, thought Corporal Downey, had he heard such loathing condensed into two words. “I'll die first.”

Zang bared his teeth in a grin. “You may think you will—but you won't! I'll break you! An' you'll come with me if I've got to back-pack you clean through Alasky! An' Scotty McTague's gold, an' Cush's, too.”

Again the girl laughed, sneeringly, this time. “Sure, you big four flusher! There are only a couple of tons of gold!”

“That's where the Siwashes comes in,” retorted Zang. “I ain't no fool! I'll pack this here gold to the fort an' tell Cush I want to bank it, an' when he opens the safe—out goes his light. Then I'll make a couple of Siwashes, er wood choppers, or whoever's around, help me cache

what I can't carry of his gold an' McTague's. An' when it's all cached nice an' safe—a couple of shots from this gun—an' they ain't no one knows where the cache is but me—an' I'm gone—me an' you together!"

Corporal Downey saw the girl's face pale, and as the man paused for a moment he read the appeal in her eyes as they glanced into his own. But the young officer shook his head with an air of profoundest dejections. "There's nothin' I can do, miss. The way it looks from here—I'm jest one more murder."

"Murder hell!" cried Zang, turning fiercely upon Downey. "You don't think I'm fool enough to kill a Mounted, do you? Kill anyone else an' you got one or two police on yer tail till they git tired of the job, or you lose 'em. But kill a Mounted an' you got the hull damn force onto you from then on! I ain't no fool! I'm Louis Zang! I don't give a damn fer one or two police—don't mind 'em no more'n so many flies. But the hull force—that's different—the odds ain't right. They wouldn't give a man no break!"

Downey grinned, and the man snarled at the girl, as he pointed to the handcuffs that lay on the floor where they had fallen. "Pick them bracelets up an' snap one on his right wrist!"

The girl hesitated, and Downey nodded, as the man reached viciously toward her. "Better do as he says," advised the officer. "He's crackin' the whip right now."

When the cuff went fast with a slight click, Zang pointed to the dead man. "Now, snap the other on Doc's wrist." The girl complied, with a shudder, and Zang grinned. "Now, policeman, you've got you a prisoner—an' a dirty, double-crossin' bastard of a one, too. If you have good luck you'll git somewheres with him. I'm givin' you a break."

Slipping Downey's pistol beneath his shirt, Zang proceeded methodically to search the officer's clothing, dumping the articles onto the floor as he removed them from the pockets. The heavy pocketknife and the notebook and pencil he transferred to his own pocket, remarking with a grin: "If you git his hand off you'll gnaw it off, like a mink with his foot in a trap. I'm takin' all axes an' knives an' files an' such like with me. I'd ort to knock out yer front teeth, at that—an' mebby I will. An' I'm takin' yer pencil an' paper so you can't write out the story if you don't git no place with him. The way it'll look, when they find you, if you don't git through you had you a prisoner, an' each killed t'other—

an' nothin' on Louis Zang. If you do git through, draggin' that—I an' my woman'll be a long time gone." From the side pocket of Downey's coat he drew a bar of chocolate which he tossed to the floor with a snort of contempt. "All kids has got to have their candy, ain't they, sonny?" he sneered. "Well, there it is, right where you kin reach it when you git hongry. They ain't no one ever accused Louis Zang of stealin' candy from a kid. I ain't found what I'm huntin'—but I will if I've got to strip you naked."

Corporal Downey laughed. "I suppose you're hunting the key to those cuffs."

"They'll be makin' you inspector, some time," sneered Zang. "You guessed right the first crack out of the box."

"Just keep on hunting," grinned Downey. "You don't suppose I'm fool enough to carry the key, do you? A lot of men have got away by stealing the bracelet key while the officer slept, or something. I figure that the place to unlock my prisoners is down to headquarters."

Zang eyed him narrowly. "You mean you'd of kep' me cuffed till we'd got clean back to Dawson?"

"If you hadn't got so boisterous you'd have found out."

"Yer a hard-boiled baby, ain't you—you an' yer finger tracks an' yer candy? How about the law agin mistreatin' prisoners? A man's wrists would of be'n plumb raw, time he got there!"

"We'd of put arniky on 'em," grinned Downey. "That would of eased 'em up till the hangin'."

After removing the officer's shoes and socks, the man gave up the search. "I'm a-goin' to knock yer front teeth out, 'fore I go," he snarled. "If yer so damn hard-boiled, I'll give you a dost of yer own medicine."

In an agony of terror Nan Cushing watched every movement of Louis Zang as he searched in vain for the handcuff key. And, almost imperceptibly, she edged nearer and nearer the door. Cold horror gripped her as she pictured herself in the power of this fiend who openly boasted his cold-blooded murders and flaunted his prowess in the very teeth of the police. Brad Trevis—her father—the Siwashes or wood choppers—she had no slightest doubt in the world but that Zang would carry out his dastardly program to the letter. If she could only slip through that door and dash across the clearing! Once in the timber she knew Zang could never catch her. She could warn Trevis—warn her father—and if

Zang tried to follow, his absence would give Corporal Downey a chance to free himself from Doc Milroy.

There was an ax in the cabin. She had noticed it standing beside the woodpile near the little stove. The man was on his knees, pulling at the officer's shoe, cursing under his breath, threatening to knock his teeth out. It was now or never! Gathering her muscles, the girl sprang past the table. Zang's foot shot out behind him, and she crashed heavily to her hands and knees, her forehead striking a corner of the overturned bench. The next instant Zang stood over her, reached down, jerked her to her feet and hurled her back against the table. He grinned as he glanced at the thin trickle of blood that coursed down her cheek and dripped onto her flannel shirt. "You'll learn after while," he leered into her blazing eyes, "that you can't buck Louis Zang. No one kin! A lot of 'em's learnt it a'ready—an' they's a lot more that'll find it out."

The girl scarcely heard the words. Despite the pain in her forehead, her brain worked rapidly. Where was Brad Trevis? He had left the post an hour or an hour and a half before she had. To be sure, she had "burned the trail," but even so, Trevis should have reached the cabin before

this. Maybe he was even now reconnoitering in the bush near the edge of the clearing. She must warn him! Filling her lungs she screamed—a wild, thin shriek of mortal agony—and again—and again.

“Yell yer head off!” taunted Zang. “That had ort to fetch Trevis on the run if he’s anywheres in the hills, an’ when he shows up in that door I’ll blow his belly out through the back of his shirt!”

On the floor beside the body of Doc Milroy, Corporal Downey gathered his knees close against his chest. Zang’s back was toward him as he faced the girl, when suddenly the officer’s feet shot out and caught the huge man squarely behind the knees. “Go!” he yelled, as Zang’s legs buckled beneath him.

Like a flash of light, the girl bounded across the floor and out through the open doorway. With a curse, Zang regained his feet and leaped after her.

There was the sound of a heavy impact, and then silence, save for certain low scuffling sounds, and the sound of pent breath released suddenly under strain.

Chapter XXIII
AT THE CABIN

FROM his place of concealment in the bush at the edge of the clearing Brad Trevis could not see into the shack. Snatches of loud talk reached his ears. Evidently the news brought by the girl of the failure of Old Cush's plan to drive him out of the country had started an altercation between the two men. Trevis smiled grimly. "Zang is probably for knocking me off the minute I show up, and Milroy advising caution. And Nan?" . . . He found himself wondering just where Nan stood on the proposition. A sudden thought thrilled him—was it possible that the girl knew nothing of the whole rotten plot? That she was acting blindly as a messenger from Old Cush to the two in the cabin? If, as Old Cush said, she had been absent from the fort for a month, it was very possible that she knew nothing—was ignorant even of the murder of Scotty McTague. Well, he would know soon enough.

Dismissing the girl from his mind, Trevis sought to formulate some plan of action. Mani-

festly he must wait for the men in the cabin to make the first move.

In the direction of the creek a twig snapped sharply. Flattening himself to the ground, he withdrew closer into the shelter of the low-hanging spruce branches and peered cautiously in the direction of the sound. A minute passed—two—and again he heard the sound—the snapping of a tiny dry twig beneath a stealthily approaching foot. Then, in an opening between two trees, a movement—so slow and shadow-like as to be almost imperceptible. Craning his neck for a better view, Trevis found himself staring straight into the face of Old Cush! The man's eyes were on the clearing. There was a grim, set look upon his frowning face, and he held a cupped hand to an ear, as though to catch the words that issued unintelligibly from the cabin. His other hand grasped a rifle. The next moment he had faded from sight in a thicket of young spruce at the extreme edge of the clearing.

Trevis shuddered. "What a man in the woods!" he breathed. "Got within fifty feet of me without making a sound, and I could barely see him move when I was looking right at him!" A sickening sensation came over him. "What chance have I got against a man like that? Zang

with his bluff and bluster and his bull-like method of attack gives me no concern. Even the suave, crafty Milroy doesn't bother me. But Cush—if ever deadly purpose was registered on a man's face, it was on his, as he stood there listening—and behind the purpose, a man realizes instinctively, lies the ability to carry it out. Damn him—I should have shot him where he stood!" A mighty anger welled up within him, supplanting the feeling of sickness and futility. "I'll get 'em," he hissed, savagely. "I'll beat 'em all! And it'll be in fair fight, too—not from ambush!"

Suddenly he was upon his feet—thrashing, crashing among the entangling branches like a wounded bull moose. Old Cush was forgotten—and Zang and Doc Milroy? The sound that had brought him to his feet was a thin, shrill scream—a woman's scream—Nan Cushing's! Again it sounded, and yet again—a scream of mortal agony or of abysmal soul-terror! Trevis's brain worked like lightning as he crashed into the clearing. Had the girl opposed the plan to murder him, and were they—— Another thought leaped into his brain, and he halted abruptly in the open as a deadly chill seemed to grip his heart. Were the screams a part of a deep design?

Had the conspirators guessed that, since he had not showed up at the cabin, he would be hiding in the scrub—and was this their means of bringing him into the open? Cursing himself for falling so easily into such an obvious trap, he dashed on. If trap it was, he was too late to avoid it now. Old Cush would have a bead on him—could drop him any second he chose. Why in hell didn't he shoot? Ten seconds more—five—and he would gain the corner of the cabin. By God, he would die fighting!

A form flashed into view and Trevis glanced into the white face of Nan Cushing as she dashed, wide-eyed, into the clearing. The next instant he rounded the corner. There was a crash that knocked him off his feet and sent the rifle spinning from his hand. Half-blinded by the pain in his forehead, he realized that there was another man down. Thick arms and legs were thrashing about, and he could feel a thick body writhing beneath him. He opened his eyes to stare straight into the blazing eyes of Louis Zang. Eyes that glowed, deep down, with a smoldering, flickering red. A sharp cry sounded in his ear and he recognized the voice of the girl: "The pistol! The pistol! Look out!"

Like a flash Trevis's left hand shot out and

grasped Zang's right wrist, and not an instant too soon, for the man had almost succeeded in bringing the muzzle of Downey's service gun against the side of his head. Followed then moments of titanic struggle while the wrist of the hand that held the gun was forced slowly upward and backward, as the breath whistled audibly from wildly pumping lungs. With a sudden shifting movement, incredibly swift, Trevis shot his right hand beneath Zang's extended chin and his fingers closed in a vise-like grip on the man's thick throat. Deep and deeper into the yielding flesh sank the fingers. Zang's eyes bulged wildly as the air gulped and gurgled into his tortured lungs, to be expelled in great retching spasms. His hand grasped at Trevis's wrist, wrenching, twisting, pushing with all the force of mighty muscles to free his throat from the death grip that was slowly but surely cutting off the breath from his lungs.

Frantically Nan Cushing circled close to the two struggling forms. Twice she tried to kick the gun from Zang's hand. The second time her pac landed upon Trevis's fingers with a force that nearly caused him to lose his grip on the wrist. "Stand back!" he cried. "The gun's loaded and cocked! You might get shot!"

The mighty struggles slowed to a deadlock as the two men rested against further effort. Neither dared to relax his grip. Zang had succeeded in blocking any further clamping down of Trevis's fingers, but could not break the grip that was shutting off two thirds of his supply of air.

A sound in the doorway caused the girl to glance up from her fascinated scrutiny of the struggle. Corporal Downey had succeeded in dragging the body of Doc Milroy to the door, but instead of coming to Trevis's aid, he stood grinning down upon the two locked men. The sight angered the girl. "Why don't you do something?" she cried, dancing up and down before him. "Don't stand there grinning like an ape—do something! If Brad loses his grip Zang will kill him—and it will be your fault, too!"

Corporal Downey's grin widened. "It don't look from here, mom, like he was goin' to lose his grip," he answered, and before the outraged eyes of the girl, he deliberately conveyed to his mouth a liberal fragment of chocolate, which he proceeded to munch with evident relish.

Rage blazed in the girl's eyes at the sight. She stamped her foot and shook a clenched fist in his face. "You're a—a *hell of a policeman!*" she cried. "You stand there eating candy when——"

The words ceased abruptly and she stood staring in open-mouthed astonishment as the smiling officer raised a hand to his mouth and removed therefrom a tiny key, which had been concealed in the chocolate that he had been munching. This he proceeded to fit into the lock of the steel bracelet that encircled his wrist. The next moment the steel jangled to the floor. Stooping, Corporal Downey removed the other cuff from Milroy's wrist, and stepping through the doorway, he wrenched the gun from Zang's hand and snapped the cuff on his wrist. It was but the work of a few moments, with Trevis's help, to roll the man onto his belly and lock his wrists together behind his back.

When Zang regained his feet Corporal Downey grinned into the glowering eyes. "It's just like you said, Zangwell—all kids must have their candy. I've had mine. An', jest like I said, when we git down to headquarters I'll onlock them cuffs." As he finished the words he raised his arms and hurled the little key far into the brush.

Brad Trevis rose from the ground with his brain in a whirl. Like a flash of blinding light the realization came to him that Old Cush had told the truth! There was a policeman in the hills—and that policeman, Corporal Downey! Un-

answered questions flooded his brain. Why had Cush advised him to skip the country? Was it merely to test his courage? What was he doing lurking there in the scrub at the edge of the clearing? Could it be that he was there to protect him, Brad Trevis, from the machinations of the plotters? Or from the law? And Nan—why was she at the shack? Had she made the journey to warn him? He glanced up—straight into the eyes of the girl. Impulsively he stepped toward her. “Nan,” he said, “Nan.”

Standing beside Louis Zang, near the doorway, Corporal Downey saw the eager light fade from the man's eyes as the girl shrank away from him. And he heard the words of bitter scorn that fell from her lips as she faced him with flashing eyes: “Stand back! I hate you! I—I came down here to warn you—I'd have come to warn any man that was being framed for a crime he did not commit. And I hate any man that would be guilty of—of the thing you did in Dawson! Wronging a man, that way—and then leaping like a craven through the window! I never want to see you again!”

None had noticed the figure that, early in the *mêlée*, had swiftly crossed the clearing and taken a position just around the corner of the cabin.

"Why don't you tell her the straight of it, Brad?" asked Corporal Downey, as, with set lips, Trevis turned toward the doorway.

Trevis shook his head. "No—it's for my sister, Downey—she must never know!"

Corporal Downey noted that the girl's eyes were upon them, now—questioning. "But your sister does know, Brad," he said. "She knows, an' everyone else in Dawson knows, how you shouldered the blame to save her happiness—to keep her from finding out what a no-'count lecher her husband was. But it didn't work, Brad. An' the sourdoughs is all wonderin' when you'll come driftin' back. An' your sister is wonderin' most of all. You see, when this here Doc Milroy told the inspector that it was you they suspected of pullin' off this killin', he sent for me an' I didn't lose no time gittin' here. It ain't every day I git the chance to clear a man that's be'n framed twice, hand runnin', fer murder."

"What do you mean?" cried Trevis, his questioning gaze on the officer's face. "How do they all know—what happened that night in Dawson? And what do you mean about being framed twice for murder?"

"It's like this, Brad," answered Corporal

Downey. "Yer brother-in-law, Duke Carnation, is dead. Somehow Frenchy LaBelle got holt of a gun an' he shot Carnation in Stoel's back room while I was goin' on down to his shack to arrest him."

"Arrest him? What for?"

"Fer the murder of an Injun named Moses Fox. You see, Carnation, he figured you'd got killed on the jam, an' I guess he didn't want folks to find out that he'd refused to go with you an' rescue Moosehide an' Camillo Bill. So he shot the Injun with your rifle an' fixed him up to look like you done it."

"The damned scoundrell!" cried Trevis. "He got just what was coming to him—but it's too bad Frenchy LaBelle will have to swing for his murder. Couldn't you make it manslaughter or something, Downey?"

"Well," said Corporal Downey, gravely, "I investigated the whole case pretty thorough. An' after I'd got all through, I turned Frenchy loose. It looked to me like a pretty good case of self-defense. You see, Frenchy, he claimed Carnation come at him with a wash dish."

"Do you mean," cried Nan Cushing, facing Corporal Downey with shining eyes, "that Brad Trevis wasn't in that man's house that night—

that it was another who jumped out through the window—and that Brad took the blame to—to——”

“Yes, miss,” answered Downey, “that’s jest what he done—so his sister wouldn’t know what a damn rotter her husband was.”

The young officer saw that the girl’s eyes were shining and that her cheeks had flushed very red. Impulsively she thrust out her hands. “Oh, I hope you’ll forgive me—for the things I said when you stood there in the doorway! But you see, I—I loved Brad so—and I was terribly afraid that Louis Zang would kill him!”

And Corporal Downey laughed aloud as with a quick, glad cry Brad Travis gathered the girl into his arms.

“Well—I’ll be damned!” exclaimed a voice, and all looked up, startled to see Old Cush standing at the corner of the cabin. He eyed his daughter solemnly. “Didn’t I tell you that folks don’t always git things straight—an’ that judgin’ a man by eye was better than judgin’ him by ear? But what I claim is that if you love Brad Trevis so much—up to now you’ve took a hell of a way of showin’ it!”

“I suppose,” said Trevis, facing the older man with a smile on his face, and an arm about the

waist of the girl, "that it would be the proper thing for me to ask you for your daughter."

"Ask hell!" exclaimed Old Cush, a twinkle in his keen eyes. "You've got her, ain't you? An' God knows if you kin handle her any better'n what I could you're welcome. But, come on—I left the fort alone—an' with a safe full of gold, too. First time I ever done it. Let's plant Doc an' git back—the drinks is on the house."

THE END



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